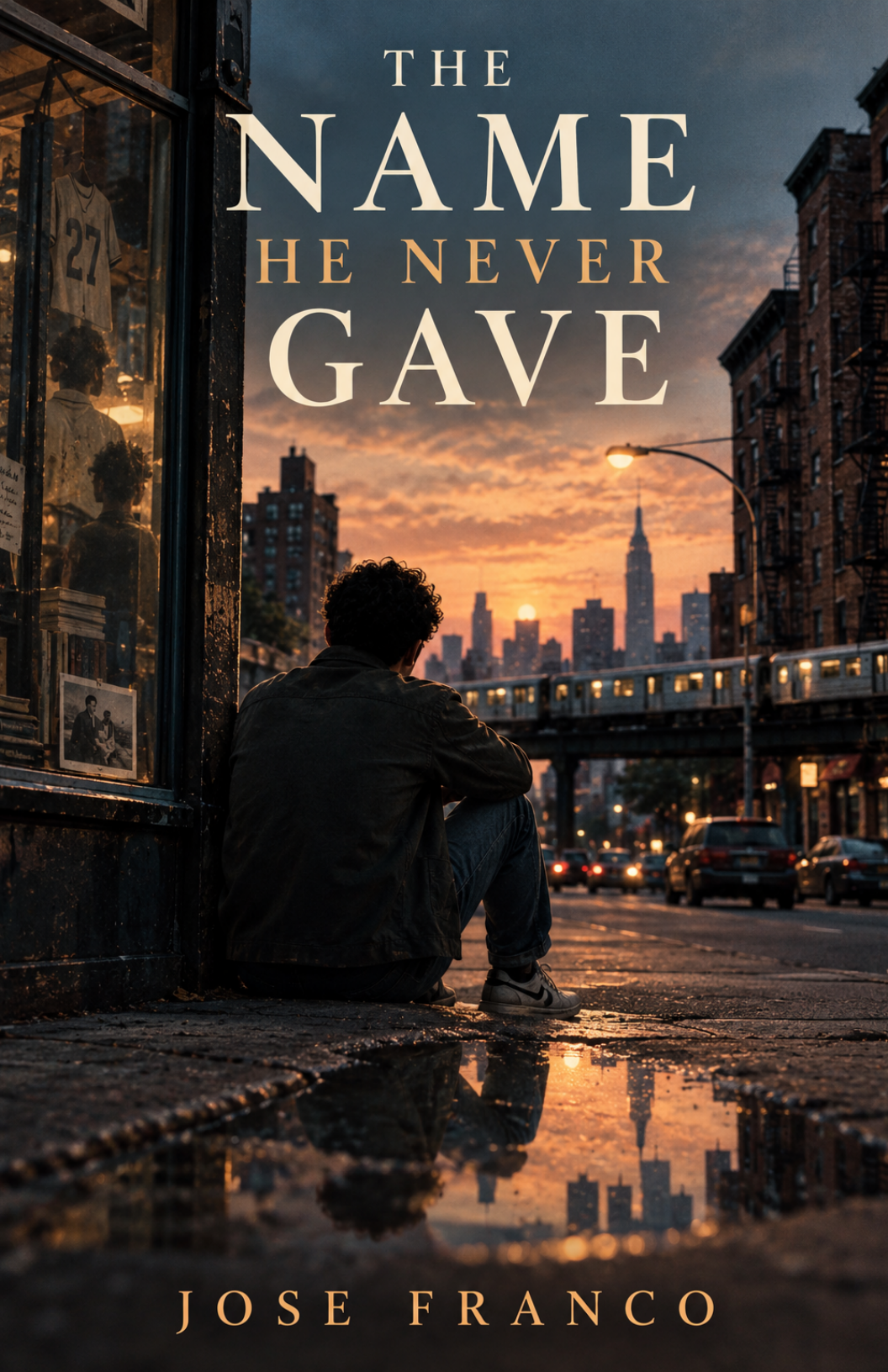

THE
NAME
HE NEVER
GAVE
JOSE FRANCO

The Name He Never Gave

Jose Franco

For Randy Rivera, whose life ended at twenty-three, but whose friendship gave mine wings long after—I did the lifting, but for years, I borrowed your reasons.

Prologue

There are several reasons his name does not appear in this book.

The first is none of your business.

The second is none of mine.

The third is that I am not entirely certain a name would help.

Names are useful things. They allow teachers to take attendance, governments to collect taxes, mothers to shout from windows, women to know whose telephone calls they should stop returning, and bartenders to decide whether the nervous seventeen-year-old holding the driver's license resembles the twenty-three-year-old printed on it.

Names establish that somebody exists.

They are considerably less useful at establishing who.

He understood this earlier than most people and abused the privilege immediately.

Depending upon when you met him, he might have been from the Bronx, California, Manhattan, or somewhere conveniently difficult to verify. He might have been a baseball player, writer, businessman, architecture student, intellectual, street kid, respectable young professional, or a man temporarily connected to people whose business activities were better left undescribed.

Some of these things were true.

A few became true later.

Several were complete bullshit.

The difficulty is determining which.

He did not always know either.

That sounds like an excuse.

It may be.

You should get used to that problem.

He was born into a Dominican family in New York City in 1967, which is already more information than he gave certain women. He grew up in the Bronx at a time when adults still settled factual disagreements by finding another adult who agreed with them. Newspapers were evidence. Television was evidence. Your uncle was evidence if he had once met somebody who worked for the city.

Nobody carried the world's accumulated information in a pocket.

This did not make people less certain.

Quite the opposite.

A rumor could travel six blocks and acquire eyewitnesses.

He loved books because books appeared to solve this problem.

Books had pages.

Pages had numbers.

Authors had names.

Footnotes existed.

A sentence printed between two covers seemed to have undergone some ceremony transforming opinion into fact.

This belief would cost him considerable time.

He became a reader.

Then a writer.

Then, more dangerously, a person who could explain himself.

There are people whose mistakes are limited by their vocabulary.

He was not one of them.

Give him enough time and he could construct an argument explaining why his jealousy was love, his arrogance was standards, his cowardice was prudence, his selfishness was independence, his need for approval was ambition, and his cruelty was merely honesty arriving without proper packaging.

He could also be extraordinarily kind.

This complicated everything.

It would be easier if assholes were assholes continuously.

Human beings have refused us this convenience.

The selfish man pays somebody's rent.

The generous woman humiliates her daughter.

The coward walks into danger.

The brave man remains silent at precisely the moment courage becomes expensive.

The racist loves somebody he has been taught to hate and somehow manages not to notice what this should do to the rest of his thinking.

The intellectual recognizes contradictions everywhere except in the bathroom mirror.

He was particularly gifted at that last one.

For years he kept notebooks.

This will become important, although perhaps not in the way he hoped.

He wrote arguments, observations, telephone numbers, declarations, apologies, lists of books, political opinions, baseball thoughts, descriptions of women, judgments of friends, judgments of strangers, judgments of people he had known for seven minutes, and occasionally judgments of himself.

Those were especially severe.

He mistook severity for honesty for quite a while.

Many people do.

If you call yourself an asshole before anybody else does, you have not necessarily achieved self-awareness.

Sometimes you have merely called dibs.

Still, he kept looking.

That counts for something.

How much is another question.

This story begins when he is a boy and ends when he is twenty-five.

There is no good reason for this.

Twenty-five is not where a human being finishes.

Nothing clicks into place.

No committee certifies the judgment.

The frightened parts do not surrender their weapons. The ego does not vacate the premises. The brain does not send a telegram announcing that construction has been completed and adulthood may commence.

Twenty-five is simply where we will stop watching.

A boundary has to be placed somewhere.

This one seemed sufficiently arbitrary to be honest.

There is another problem.

Memory.

He remembers things.

His family remembers them differently.

His friends remember things he does not remember at all.

Some events were written down shortly after they happened, which would seem helpful until one remembers who did the writing.

Him.

The defendant was also the stenographer.

I have done what I can.

I have compared versions.

I have distrusted the sentences that arrived too perfectly.

I have occasionally trusted them anyway.

I have undoubtedly gotten things wrong.

He certainly has.

You will too.

That is part of the arrangement.

At some point you may decide you understand him.

Be careful.

You may hate him for something you have done yourself.

You may forgive him because you recognize yourself.

That is not necessarily more honorable.

You may decide his childhood explains the man.

It doesn't.

You may decide his family explains him.

They don't.

Neither do the Bronx, Dominican blood, baseball, money, women, books, class, fear, New York City, ambition, stupidity, tenderness, politics, sex, shame, or the particular historical accident of being young before everyone became permanently reachable.

They contributed evidence.

That is different.

He made choices.

Some good.

Some terrible.

Most ordinary.

They mattered enormously to the people standing close enough to be affected by them.

Beyond that circle, the universe displayed an almost admirable lack of interest.

He had difficulty accepting this.

He wanted to matter.

You probably do too.

I do.

There.

Now nobody has the advantage.

So we will begin with a boy in the Bronx who does not yet know that he will spend much of his life constructing explanations for himself and then trying to escape them.

He does not know he will invent biographies.

He does not know which women will leave.

He does not know which friends will remain.

He does not know that his parents are getting older because, to a child, parents have committed the astonishing discourtesy of appearing permanent.

He does not know what money means.

Or class.

Or love.

Or loyalty.

Or fear.

He will eventually develop excellent explanations for all of them.

That will be part of the problem.

For now, though, he is just a boy.

We should give him that much.

His name?

No.

You don't need it.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Chapter 1

“The First Version of the Truth”

Before he became a liar, he was a child, which is more or less the apprenticeship.
This was the Bronx in the 1970s, although nobody he knew called it the Bronx in the 1970s. That would come later, when people who survived a period discovered they had been living through an era.
At the time it was Tuesday.
Tuesday smelled like onions.
Not metaphorical onions. Actual onions.
They were frying somewhere on the third floor, possibly with peppers, although the peppers had not yet made their way downstairs. The hallway smelled like onions, radiator heat, somebody's cigarette, somebody else's garbage, and the industrial lemon the super used to mop the lobby whenever the accumulated evidence of human habitation became impossible to ignore.
There were buildings in New York where the lobby protected the residents from the outside world.
This was not one of them.
Here the outside world came upstairs.
The front door had a lock, but locks in poor neighborhoods have always possessed a more philosophical relationship with their stated purpose. This one discouraged people who weren't particularly interested in coming inside.
Everybody else seemed to manage.

Children ran through it.
Women carried groceries through it.
Men who didn't live there leaned against it.
A dog once came through it and remained in the building for three days without anybody determining whose dog it was or whether the dog himself had made any long-term housing decisions.
The boy was nine.
He was sitting on the second-to-last step of the stoop because the last step belonged to older boys.
Nobody had written this rule.
There had been no vote.
Nevertheless, he understood it with the clarity children reserve for things adults haven't explained.
The older boys occupied the bottom.
Small children stayed near the top where mothers could yell for them.
Nine was somewhere in between.
This was how governments began.
He was reading.
That wasn't unusual.
What was unusual was what he was reading.
The Daily News had been left folded beside somebody on the stoop, and he had taken it after determining that the previous owner had abandoned it.
"Why you reading that?"
He looked up.
A boy named Manny was standing over him.
"I'm reading."
"I can see that."
"Then why you asking?"
Manny considered this.
Manny was eleven and therefore possessed authority over the nine-year-old in approximately the same way a lieutenant possesses authority over a private, except neither

had weapons and both had to be upstairs before the streetlights came on.
"What you reading about?"
He looked back at the newspaper.
He had been reading about New York City being broke.
This fascinated him because he hadn't known cities could be broke.
People could be broke.
His mother could be broke.
His father could announce they were broke despite there being food in the refrigerator, which had always struck him as suspicious.
But New York?
New York had buildings.
New York had banks.
New York had stores where people gave money to other people all day.
Where did the money go?
"The city got no money."
Manny shrugged.
"My mother got no money."
"Yeah, but she's a person."
Manny looked offended on his mother's behalf.
"The city is a place."
"So?"
"So how does a place run out of money?"
Manny sat beside him.
This was how intellectual societies formed before grant funding.
"My father says the mayor fucked everything up."
"How?"
"I don't know."
"Then how you know he fucked everything up?"
"Because my father said."
The boy thought about this.

This was an excellent source by the standards currently available to him.
His own father had said similar things about the mayor, although he had also blamed the governor, President Ford, unions, landlords, taxes, welfare, criminals, lazy people, rich people, poor people who wanted to be rich, and once, memorably, the Mets.
The Mets' contribution to municipal insolvency remained unclear.
"Maybe your father's right."
"He is."
"How you know?"
Manny stared at him.
There are questions human beings ask because they want answers and questions human beings ask because they haven't yet learned the social consequences of asking them.
The boy specialized in the second kind.
"My father knows shit."
"Mine too."
There.
Problem solved.
Two fathers knew shit.
The city remained broke.

His mother called from the window.
She did not call his name once.
Mothers in the neighborhood understood acoustics.
The first call established jurisdiction.
The second indicated impatience.
The third contained consequences.
He closed the newspaper at two.
"COMING."
"You better come now!"
"I SAID I'M COMING."
This was technically true.

He had announced an intention to come.
He had not yet moved.
Years later he would become fascinated by the distance between what people said and what they did. At nine, he was already conducting field research.
He folded the newspaper and tucked it under his arm.
"You taking that?"
Manny asked.
"Yeah."
"Why?"
"I didn't finish."
Manny nodded.
Then, because friendship between boys frequently requires an insult to prevent sincerity from becoming visible, he said:
"You're fucking weird."
The boy smiled.
He liked Manny.

His mother was in the kitchen.
She was Dominican.
His father was Puerto Rican.
These facts will become more important to other people than they were to the boy.
At nine he understood ethnicity primarily through food, accents, flags, relatives arguing about baseball, and adults making sweeping statements about entire populations based upon one unpleasant interaction with a particular member of that population.
Dominicans did this.
Puerto Ricans did this.
Black people did this.
White people did this.
Cubans definitely did this.
Everybody seemed to know everybody else remarkably well without having met most of them.

The boy listened carefully.
He was gathering evidence.
His mother looked at the newspaper.
"What are you doing with that?"
"Reading it."
"I know you're reading it. Why?"
He had already encountered this question downstairs.
Apparently literacy required explanation.
"The city's broke."
"I know."
"How?"
"How what?"
"How's the city broke?"
His mother was stirring something on the stove.
"The city spends more money than it has."
"Why?"
"Because that's what people do."
This answer was considerably more interesting than Manny's father's theory.
"Do we?"
She stopped stirring.
"Do we what?"
"Spend more money than we have?"
"No."
The speed of the answer interested him.
He looked around the kitchen.
Nothing appeared financially conclusive.
There were groceries.
There was a refrigerator.
There was an envelope near the telephone with something handwritten across it.
There was money in a glass jar above the cabinet.
He knew about the jar.
He wasn't supposed to know about the jar.

Children know nearly everything adults don't tell them and understand approximately twelve percent of it.
His mother pointed the spoon at him.
"Go wash your hands."
"Why?"
"Because we're going to eat."
"They're not dirty."
She looked at him.
He looked at his hands.
His hands reconsidered their position.
He went to the bathroom.

The apartment contained five people and approximately eleven opinions about everything.
His older brother had recently discovered that being older entitled him to information that the boy was not entitled to have.
His father had discovered this years earlier.
His mother possessed information neither of them knew existed.
The boy suspected his mother ran the actual government.
At dinner his father mentioned money.
The boy became attentive.
"Everything going up."
His mother said something in Spanish.
His father answered in English.
This happened often.
The language used in the apartment depended less upon who understood which language than upon what was being said and how much emotional velocity it had acquired.
English could become Spanish halfway through a sentence.
Spanish could return as English if clarification was required.
Certain words never needed translation.
Carajo was one of them.

"Ford says the city has to straighten itself out," his father said.
The boy looked up.
"Who's Ford?"
His brother laughed.
"The president, stupid."
"I know."
He had not known.
This was the first version of a skill he would eventually perfect: converting newly received information into information he had possessed all along.
His brother saw through it immediately.
"No you didn't."
"Yes I did."
"Then why'd you ask?"
"I meant who's Ford to tell New York what to do?"
This was good.
Even his father looked at him.
The boy had discovered something.
If caught not knowing something, enlarge the question.
It would serve him for decades.
His father leaned back.
"That's a good question."
His brother objected.
"That's not what he meant."
"How you know what I meant?"
"Because you're full of shit."
"Eat," their mother said.
The constitutional crisis ended.
His father continued.
"Government can't keep spending money it doesn't have."
"Why not?"
"Because eventually somebody has to pay."
"Who?"
His father pointed his fork at him.

"You."
Everybody laughed.
The boy didn't.
He looked genuinely concerned.
"Me?"
"Not you. Taxpayers."
"You said me."
"It's an expression."
"That's not an expression."
His father stared at him.
His brother began laughing again.
Their mother smiled without looking up from her plate.
The boy had not intended to be funny.
This was something else he would spend years misunderstanding.
People frequently laughed hardest when he was serious.

The television was on after dinner.
Televisions were often on even when nobody was watching them.
They were electronic fireplaces around which American families gathered to ignore one another.
His father sat in his chair.
There was a chair that belonged to his father.
This was another unwritten law.
The boy had sat in it many times when his father wasn't home, but the instant his father entered the apartment the chair reverted to its rightful sovereign.
Property rights were apparently contextual.
The boy lay on the floor with the newspaper.
He reread the story about the city.
There were words he didn't understand.
Municipal.
Default.
Bonds.

Fiscal.
He circled them with a pen.
His brother stepped over him.
"What you doing?"
"Looking up words."
"Why?"
This again.
Why was everybody so concerned with why he was reading?
"Because I don't know them."
His brother looked down.
"Municipal means city."
"How you know?"
"School."
The boy wrote CITY above municipal.
"What's default?"
His brother paused.
"Means you don't pay."
"How you know?"
"I just know."
This answer bothered him.
I just know.
Adults said it.
Older kids said it.
Teachers occasionally said it with more words.
He was beginning to suspect that I just know meant several different things.
Sometimes it meant I learned this somewhere and forgot where.
Sometimes it meant everybody knows this.
Sometimes it meant please stop asking.
And occasionally, although he couldn't yet prove it, it seemed to mean:
I don't know either, but I got here first.
He wrote:
DEFAULT = DON'T PAY.

Then underneath:
WHY?
His brother saw it.
"Why what?"
"Why don't they pay?"
"Because they don't got the money."
"Why?"
His brother walked away.
This would happen often.

Outside, the neighborhood continued being itself.
A siren passed.
Somebody yelled from a window.
Somebody yelled back from another window.
A car horn expressed an opinion.
Music came from somewhere.
The city was supposedly broke, but nobody had informed the city.
It remained loud.
This impressed him.
He imagined New York as a person who had discovered he had no money and decided not to mention it.
There was dignity in this.
Or denial.
At nine he couldn't distinguish between them.
At fifty-nine he wouldn't always be much better.
But we are getting ahead of ourselves.
He went to his room.
He had a notebook.
The notebook had originally been intended for school.
This was evident from the first six pages, which contained handwriting exercises, arithmetic and several things a teacher had instructed him to copy.
After that, institutional control collapsed.
There were baseball statistics.

A drawing of a car.
A list of the five fastest boys he knew.
A girl named Lisa's name written once and then violently scribbled over, an act that concealed nothing.
There were words.
Questions.
Things people had said.
He opened to a blank page.
At the top he wrote:
NEW YORK CITY IS BROKE
Then:
HOW CAN A CITY BE BROKE?
He thought.
His father said government spent too much.
His mother said people spent more than they had.
Manny's father said the mayor fucked everything up.
President Ford apparently believed New York had to straighten itself out.
His brother said default meant not paying.
Five explanations.
They seemed related.
They also seemed suspiciously dependent upon who was giving them.
He wrote:
EVERYBODY KNOWS WHY BUT EVERYBODY HAS A DIFFERENT WHY.
He stared at the sentence.
It felt important.
Then he crossed it out.
It sounded stupid.
He tried again.
PEOPLE SAY THEY KNOW THINGS WHEN THEY MEAN THEY BELIEVE THEM.
He stared at that.
Too many words.

He crossed it out too.
Then he wrote:
NOBODY KNOWS SHIT.
Better.
He closed the notebook.

The next morning he told Manny he'd figured out why New York was broke.
This was not true.
"Why?"
"Because everybody wants money from the city but nobody wants to give the city money."
Manny nodded slowly.
This was close enough to something he'd heard his father say that it sounded intelligent.
"That's what my father says."
The boy felt disappointed.
He had wanted it to be his idea.
So he changed it.
"That's only part of it."
"What's the other part?"
He hadn't anticipated a follow-up question.
He looked across the street.
A man was opening the gate of the bodega.
A woman walked past carrying a shopping bag.
Two older boys were arguing about something.
A bus exhaled at the corner.
New York presented no immediate assistance.
"The banks."
"What about them?"
"They're fucking the city."
This was entirely fabricated.
Manny's eyes widened.
"How?"
The boy had no idea.

But something extraordinary happened inside him.
Instead of admitting this, he felt his mind begin constructing a bridge.
Banks had money.
New York needed money.
Therefore banks were involved.
It wasn't evidence.
It was architecture.
"They lend the city money."
This he thought might actually be true.
"And then the city owes them."
"Yeah."
"And that's why the city is broke."
"Yeah."
Manny looked impressed.
The boy felt something warm and dangerous.
He had taken four pieces of information, three overheard opinions, two words he'd learned yesterday, and one thing he'd invented thirty seconds ago and turned them into an explanation.
It felt almost identical to knowing.
That was unfortunate.
"Where'd you learn that?"
Manny asked.
There it was.
The boy could have said the newspaper.
He could have said his father.
He could have said he wasn't sure.
Instead he looked at Manny with mild surprise that the question was even necessary.
"I read."
Two words.
Technically true.
Not remotely the truth.
Manny nodded.

The boy nodded back.
And somewhere in that small transaction, something began.
Not dishonesty exactly.
Something more useful.
He discovered that words could move him.
They could move him from the younger kid on the stoop to the kid who knew something.
They could move him from ignorance to authority without requiring the inconvenient intermediate step of actually becoming an authority.
Words could change the room.
More importantly, words could change him inside the room.
He liked that.
He would eventually like it too much.
For now he picked up a Spaldeen and threw it against the building.
Manny caught it.
"You playing?"
"Yeah."
"What about your newspaper?"
"I'll read it later."
They played until somebody's mother called somebody's name.
Then somebody else's mother called somebody else's.
Windows illuminated one by one.
The street began surrendering its children.
He went upstairs.
The newspaper remained folded beneath his arm.
That night he returned to the notebook.
Under NOBODY KNOWS SHIT, he added another sentence.
MAYBE THAT INCLUDES ME.
He looked at it.
Crossed out MAYBE.
Then stared at what remained.
He didn't like it.

So he crossed out the entire sentence.
There.
Much better.

Chapter 2

“Other People's Windows”

By the summer of 1977, he had learned three important things about adults.
They lied.
They hated being called liars.
And if you waited long enough, they would explain why what they had said wasn't technically a lie.
This last category fascinated him.
His father practiced it.
His mother practiced it.
Politicians on television appeared to have built careers around it.
Even Mrs. Rivera from upstairs, who had once told his mother she hadn't seen the boy throwing a Spaldeen against the lobby wall, later clarified that she hadn't seen him start throwing the Spaldeen against the lobby wall.
This distinction saved him from an ass-whipping.
He never forgot Mrs. Rivera's courage.
Or her syntax.
He was eleven now.
Eleven is an interesting age because the world has begun revealing itself but hasn't yet provided instructions for what to do with the information.
He had also become suspicious of instructions.
Instructions were written by people.
People were unreliable.

Therefore instructions required independent verification.
This was why he had recently taken apart the family's radio.

The radio had been working perfectly.
This fact would later feature prominently in the prosecution.
He wanted to know how voices got inside it.
He understood that the voices weren't actually inside it. He wasn't stupid.
He simply couldn't understand how somebody talking somewhere else could become sound in his kitchen without anything connecting the two places.
His father had explained radio waves.
This had made things worse.
"What waves?"
"Radio waves."
"I know. What are they?"
"They're waves."
"Like water?"
"No."
"So why they call them waves?"
His father had looked at him.
The boy recognized the look.
It meant they were approaching the frontier of his father's knowledge.
He had learned not to embarrass him there.
At least not intentionally.
"So they're invisible?"
"Yes."
"And they're going through the apartment?"
"Yes."
"Right now?"
"Yes."
"Through me?"
His father sighed.
"Go outside."

This was not an answer.
It was, however, permission.
The next afternoon, when nobody was home, he took the radio apart.
He discovered wires.
A speaker.
Screws.
Metal.
Things whose names he did not know.
Nothing resembling a wave.
He put it back together.
Three screws remained.
The radio no longer worked.
This was troubling.
He put the screws in his pocket.
The radio looked exactly as it had before.
This improved the situation cosmetically.

"Who broke the radio?"
His father asked that evening.
Nobody answered.
There were four people in the room.
The boy examined his brother.
His brother examined the television.
His mother examined the boy.
Mothers are not investigators.
Investigators require evidence.
"What happened to it?" his mother asked.
"I don't know."
This was true.
He knew what he had done.
He did not know what had happened.
His mother held his eyes for a moment longer than necessary.
"Did you touch it?"

There are moments in childhood when morality confronts survival.
"I was listening to it."
Also true.
His brother looked at him.
The boy could feel the screws in his pocket.
"Was it working?"
"Yeah."
"When?"
"Yesterday."
His father slapped the side of the radio.
Adults believed mechanical devices occasionally responded to violence.
The radio remained principled.
His brother spoke.
"Maybe the batteries died."
The boy loved his brother.
His father opened the battery compartment.
The batteries were fine.
His brother looked at him.
The boy looked back.
Something passed between them.
His brother knew.
The boy knew he knew.
His brother knew the boy knew he knew.
Family is largely the accumulation of information nobody discusses.
His father put the radio down.
"Everything in this fucking house breaks."
This was an extraordinary development.
The radio had joined a larger socioeconomic pattern.
The boy was no longer responsible.
America was.
He went to the bathroom and flushed the three screws down the toilet.

This was both unnecessary and, in retrospect, poor inventory management.

The block was louder that summer.
Or perhaps he was finally old enough to hear it.
Music came through windows.
Music came from cars.
Music came from somebody carrying a radio large enough to require commitment.
Different apartments seemed to belong to different countries.
Salsa from one.
Soul from another.
Disco from somewhere else.
A man down the block listened to jazz and possessed the mysterious authority of someone who did not care whether anybody else liked jazz.
The boy admired him.
Then there were sounds he didn't yet know what to call.
Records being played in ways records weren't supposed to be played.
Parts repeated.
Breaks stretched.
Voices talking over music instead of singing with it.
Older kids understood something was happening.
The boy didn't.
This is worth remembering.
History is much easier to recognize after somebody names it.
Nobody walked through the Bronx announcing that a cultural movement was underway.
People had parties.
DJs wanted better speakers.
Kids wanted to dance.
Someone figured out how to keep the part everybody liked going longer.

Someone else grabbed a microphone.
Civilization has occasionally advanced because somebody said, essentially:
Wait. Do that part again.

His friend Manny had acquired a bicycle.
The bicycle was blue.
According to Manny, it was new.
It was not new.
This was obvious.
The handlebars were scratched.
The seat had a tear repaired with black electrical tape.
One pedal was a different color from the other.
"Where'd you get it?"
"My cousin."
"What cousin?"
"My cousin Junior."
"You don't have a cousin Junior."
"How the fuck you know all my cousins?"
This was a strong objection.
He reconsidered.
"I never heard of him."
"You don't know everybody."
This was also true.
"Where's he live?"
"Brooklyn."
This increased the plausibility because Brooklyn was sufficiently far away to contain unknown relatives.
"What part?"
Manny hesitated.
"Brooklyn."
"Brooklyn's big."
"You a fucking census?"
The interrogation ended.
They rode around taking turns.

By late afternoon the bicycle belonged to Manny so completely that even the boy had stopped wondering where it came from.
This was another thing he was beginning to understand:
A story became stronger through repetition.
Not necessarily truer.
Stronger.
The difference would cause him considerable trouble.

A girl named Evelyn lived across the street.
She was twelve.
At eleven, the difference between eleven and twelve could feel greater than the difference between thirty and forty.
Evelyn had breasts.
This complicated everything.
He had known girls before breasts.
They had been people.
Then breasts arrived and temporarily disrupted his ability to maintain this position.
He watched Evelyn from the stoop.
He tried not to watch Evelyn from the stoop.
He became aware of himself trying not to watch Evelyn from the stoop.
This was worse.
Manny noticed.
"You like Evelyn."
"No I don't."
"You always looking at her."
"I'm looking over there."
"At what?"
He had not prepared supporting documentation.
"The building."
Manny looked across the street.
"You like the building?"
"It's a nice building."

It was almost identical to theirs.
Manny began laughing.
The boy hated him.
"Go fuck yourself."
"Evelyn!"
"Shut the fuck up."
"EVELYN!"
The boy punched Manny in the arm.
Manny laughed harder.
Evelyn looked over.
The boy immediately looked away.
This was the first known instance of a behavior he would repeat with women for years: wanting desperately to be noticed and responding to being noticed by pretending he had not been trying to be noticed.
She crossed the street.
"What are you two idiots doing?"
"Nothing," the boy said.
Manny said, "He likes your building."
Evelyn looked at their building.
Then across at hers.
"What?"
The boy wanted Manny dead.
"I said your building looks better than ours."
"Why?"
Nobody in the Bronx could apparently accept a statement without demanding an explanation.
"The windows."
"The windows?"
"Yeah."
He was committed now.
"What's different about the windows?"
He looked.
Nothing.
"More light."

Evelyn stared at him.
Manny was physically shaking.
"You are so fucking weird," she said.
Then she smiled.
This changed the meaning of everything.
She walked away.
The boy watched her.
Manny watched him watching her.
"You like her."
"Shut up."
"You like her."
"I don't."
He did.
He would spend much of his life becoming increasingly sophisticated in his ability to explain why the thing he obviously felt was not the thing he actually felt.
At eleven he had not yet acquired the vocabulary.
This made him more honest.

His mother sent him to the bodega for milk.
She gave him money and told him exactly how much change to bring home.
This was important.
He bought the milk.
On the counter sat a box of candy.
He wanted one.
He calculated.
The arithmetic was unfavorable.
He could buy the candy and return without the correct change.
Or not buy the candy.
There was a third possibility involving lying about the price of milk.
He rejected it.
Not because it was wrong.

Because his mother also bought milk.
Morality sometimes benefits from easily verifiable prices.
He returned with the correct change.
His mother counted it.
"You want something?"
"No."
"You sure?"
"Yeah."
She looked at him.
"Take a quarter."
He took the quarter.
"What for?"
"Whatever."
This disturbed him.
Had he stolen the quarter first, he would have been dishonest.
Because she gave it to him, he was good.
Same quarter.
Same pocket.
Different route.
He went back downstairs and bought the candy.
He sat on the stoop eating it.
He thought about this longer than the situation warranted.

His father worked.
This was the explanation for many things.
Why he was tired.
Why he got the chair.
Why dinner waited sometimes.
Why certain questions should not be asked immediately when he walked through the door.
Work seemed to purchase authority.
The boy understood this.
He also noticed his mother worked constantly and did not possess a chair.

He did not yet know what to do with that information.
So he did what children and societies often do with inconvenient observations.
He stored it somewhere.
His mother carried groceries.
Cooked.
Cleaned.
Washed clothes.
Remembered appointments.
Remembered which bill had to be paid.
Remembered who needed what for school.
Remembered birthdays.
Remembered which relative was angry with which relative and whether they were currently speaking.
His father went to work.
The boy understood that his father worked harder.
Everybody said so.
Years later he would learn that some labor becomes invisible precisely because everybody depends upon it.
At eleven he simply knew his mother never seemed to sit down.
He also knew that if he asked why, somebody would tell him to go outside.
So he went outside.

Outside was democratic in ways the apartment wasn't.
Not equal.
Never equal.
But the rules were negotiable.
Age mattered.
Size mattered.
Reputation mattered.
Who your brother was mattered.
Who your cousin was mattered.
Whether you could fight mattered.

Whether people believed you could fight sometimes mattered more.
This interested him.
A boy named Tito had supposedly beaten up three boys at once.
Nobody had seen it.
Everybody knew it happened.
"Where?"
"Over by Crotona."
"Who saw it?"
"My cousin."
"What cousin?"
"Why you always asking about people's cousins?"
He stopped asking.
Tito's victory entered the historical record.
Years later, the boy would remember Tito beating three boys.
He would picture it.
He would almost remember being told by somebody who had been there.
This is how memory behaves when left unsupervised.
It does not preserve the past.
It renovates.

One evening a hydrant was opened.
Water shot into the street.
Children appeared as though summoned.
Someone had attached something to the hydrant to redirect the spray.
Cars approached slowly.
Some drivers waited.
Some drivers honked.
Some drivers drove through and accepted their baptism.
A man in a white Cadillac rolled down his window.
"Turn that shit down!"
Nobody knew how.

Or nobody wanted to.
The children screamed.
Water ran along the curb carrying bottle caps, cigarette butts, wrappers and whatever else the street had decided it no longer required.
The boy stood directly in the spray.
His clothes clung to him.
His sneakers filled with water.
His mother would be furious.
This knowledge improved the experience.
Music was playing somewhere.
Not from one place.
From several.
The sounds overlapped.
A salsa record competed with something heavier coming from farther down.
Someone yelled.
Someone laughed.
A woman leaned from a window and told a child to get his ass upstairs.
The child negotiated.
"FIVE MORE MINUTES!"
"NOW!"
"FOUR!"
The boy admired this.
The mother did not.
He looked up at the buildings.
Windows everywhere.
Open windows.
Curtains moving.
People leaning out.
People watching.
People not watching.
Entire families existing twenty feet away from other families who knew almost nothing about them and nevertheless knew

when their children got home, what they cooked on Sundays and whether the husband had been sleeping somewhere else.
Privacy existed.
It was simply porous.
He thought about Evelyn's windows.
He still had no idea why he'd said they were better.
But now he noticed something.
Every window showed a different piece of somebody's life.
Not enough to know them.
Enough to think you did.
This distinction would become important.

That night the electricity went out.
Not immediately everywhere in his understanding.
First the television disappeared.
Then the fan stopped.
Then the refrigerator became silent.
The apartment changed shape.
"What happened?"
"Lights went out."
"I know. Why?"
Nobody answered.
He went to the window.
Other windows were dark.
The streetlights were dark.
The buildings across the street were dark.
For the first time he could remember, the city seemed to have stopped pretending it controlled anything.
People appeared at windows.
Voices traveled differently through darkness.
Somebody shouted something.
Someone laughed.
A woman screamed at somebody to come upstairs.
His father found candles.
His mother found more.

This confirmed the boy's theory regarding the actual government.
"Is the whole city out?"
"Looks like it."
"Why?"
"Blackout."
"That's what happened. Why did it happen?"
His father lit a cigarette from the candle.
"You know, one day somebody's gonna knock the shit out of you for asking why."
The boy smiled.
"Why?"
His father tried not to laugh.
Failed.
The boy treasured the victory.

The darkness outside became exciting.
Then strange.
Then, depending upon where in the city you were standing, dangerous.
But he could only know what reached his window.
This matters.
He did not possess an aerial view of New York.
He did not know what was happening downtown.
He did not know what was happening in Brooklyn.
He did not know what was happening ten blocks away.
Nobody held a glowing rectangle displaying the collective panic of eight million people.
Information traveled at the speed of footsteps, telephones that still worked, radios running on batteries, voices through windows, and people arriving from somewhere else.
A man came down the block saying stores were getting robbed.
Which stores?
Nobody knew.

Where?
"Everywhere."
Everywhere is a popular location during emergencies.
Another person said there had been an explosion.
Someone else said lightning hit something.
Someone said the city had shut the power deliberately.
"For what?"
"Riots."
"What riots?"
"The riots that are gonna happen."
The boy listened.
This was magnificent.
Five minutes earlier nobody knew why the lights were out.
Now everybody knew.
Different things.
With confidence.
He wanted to go downstairs.
"No," his mother said.
"Everybody's outside."
"You are not everybody."
This argument irritated him because it was logically flawless.
He went back to the window.
Manny was outside.
This was intolerable.
"Manny's downstairs."
"I don't care if Manny is in Puerto Rico. You're staying here."
Manny was not Puerto Rican.
The boy considered correcting her.
Wisdom arrived unexpectedly.
He remained silent.

From the window he watched silhouettes move.
The street had become older somehow.
Without electric light, the buildings looked less permanent.
Candles appeared in windows.

Flashlights moved.
Somebody had a battery-powered radio.
People gathered around it.
Information became valuable.
The person with the radio temporarily became important.
The boy understood this immediately.
Knowledge was authority.
Even borrowed knowledge.
Especially when nobody else could check it.
He wanted a radio.
Then remembered he had broken theirs.
This was an unfortunate convergence of events.
He said nothing.
His brother looked at him.
His brother remembered.
The boy knew he remembered.
His brother smiled.
It was an evil smile.
"Would be nice if we had a radio."
The boy stared at him.
His father said, "Tell me about it."
His brother continued smiling.
The boy considered murder.
Family again.

Later, lying in bed, he listened to the city.
Sirens.
Voices.
Glass breaking somewhere.
Maybe.
He wasn't sure.
He would later remember glass breaking.
This does not mean glass broke.
He was frightened.
He would later tell people he wasn't.

This doesn't mean he was lying exactly.
Memory is generous to the person doing the remembering.
It edits posture.
Improves dialogue.
Removes trembling.
Adds cigarettes to hands that were too young to hold them.
By fourteen he would tell the blackout story differently.
By seventeen, differently again.
By twenty-five he would have been practically directing municipal emergency operations from the fire escape.
But that night he was eleven.
And eleven-year-old boys are allowed to be afraid.
He lay awake.
His brother was breathing in the other bed.
His parents were talking quietly somewhere beyond the door.
The city remained dark.
He thought about the people outside.
He thought about the stories already forming.
The explosion.
The riots.
The lightning.
The government.
Tomorrow everyone would know what happened.
By tomorrow everyone would have been somewhere.
Everyone would know somebody who saw something.
Cousins would become indispensable.
He smiled in the darkness.
Then he remembered the radio.
His smile disappeared.
Sooner or later his brother was going to tell.
He needed a story.
Not a lie.
A story.
There was a difference.

He didn't know what the difference was yet.
But he had already begun looking for it.

Chapter 3

“A Better Version of Me”

The first person he ever pretended to be was from California.
There was no reason for this.
He had never been to California.
He did not know anybody from California.
His knowledge of California consisted primarily of television, baseball, palm trees, movie stars, earthquakes, and the belief that everybody there lived close enough to the Pacific Ocean to see it from the kitchen.
He was twelve.
The girl was thirteen.
This explains some of it.
Her name was Denise.
She was visiting an aunt who lived two buildings down, and because she had never seen him before, something occurred to him that would eventually become dangerous.
She didn't know anything about him.
Nothing.
Not his family.
Not his school.
Not his friends.
Not the embarrassing incident involving a basketball, a garbage can and six witnesses whose testimony remained annoyingly consistent.
He was blank.
This was intoxicating.
They were standing outside the bodega when she asked:

"You live around here?"
He could have said yes.
He lived approximately eighty feet away.
"No."
"Where you live?"
"California."
There.
California.
He had become geographically ambitious.
"California?"
"Yeah."
"What you doing here?"
"Visiting family."
This was technically what she was doing.
He borrowed it.
"What part?"
He had not anticipated that California contained parts.
"Los Angeles."
He knew Los Angeles.
Everybody knew Los Angeles.
"You live in Hollywood?"
"No."
He laughed slightly, as if only someone unfamiliar with California would make this mistake.
This was excellent.
"No. L.A.'s big."
"Where in L.A.?"
Fuck.
"Near downtown."
"What's it like?"
He looked down the block.
"Different."
This remains one of the safest descriptions of any place on Earth.
"Different how?"

"People are more laid-back."
He had heard this somewhere.
Denise nodded.
Apparently it was true.
He relaxed.
"You surf?"
"No."
"Why not?"
"I don't live that close to the beach."
His California was becoming geographically sophisticated.
"You got an accent."
He froze.
"What accent?"
"New York."
He recovered.
"My family's from here."
"Oh."
Of course.
The accent had supporting documentation.
He smiled.
She smiled.
For approximately seven minutes he was a twelve-year-old from Los Angeles visiting relatives in the Bronx.
He liked himself.
This surprised him.

His friend Manny had witnessed everything from half a block away.
The boy knew this because Manny had been staring at him with his mouth open.
Denise went upstairs.
Manny approached slowly.
He did not speak at first.
He simply looked at him.
"What?"

Manny continued looking.
"What?"
"California?"
The boy started laughing.
Manny doubled over.
"California?"
"Shut the fuck up."
"You live right there!"
"I know where I live."
"Your mother is in the fucking window!"
The boy looked up.
His mother was indeed in the window.
This damaged California considerably.
Manny leaned against a parked car, laughing.
"Why California?"
"I don't know."
"You could've said Queens."
"That's stupid."
"California isn't stupid?"
"She believed me."
Manny stopped laughing for a second.
This appeared to impress him.
"She believed you?"
"Yeah."
"What'd you tell her?"
The boy reconstructed the conversation.
Manny began laughing again.
"You don't even know how to swim good."
"She didn't ask."
"She gonna find out you live here."
"So?"
"So then what?"
He hadn't considered this.
"I'll tell her we moved."
"From California?"

"No. From here to California."
"When?"
"Last year."
"But you're here."
"I'm visiting."
"Your own house?"
"My grandmother lives there now."
Manny stared.
The boy stared back.
Something changed in Manny's expression.
It was no longer amusement.
It was admiration.
Not moral admiration.
Craft admiration.
"You are fucking crazy."
The boy smiled.
This would become one of the nicest things people said about him.

The problem with invented lives is maintenance.
He discovered this quickly.
Denise remained in the neighborhood for three weeks.
California therefore required expansion.
He acquired a school.
A basketball team.
A best friend named Kevin.
Kevin did not exist.
This gave Kevin tremendous flexibility.
Kevin was Black because Denise asked.
Kevin's father owned a Corvette because the boy liked Corvettes.
Kevin had an older sister who was beautiful because apparently even imaginary friends required attractive relatives.
The boy's house in Los Angeles initially had a backyard.

Then a pool.
The pool was not his fault.
Denise asked whether people in California had pools.
"Some."
"You?"
He hesitated.
A reasonable liar would have said no.
"Yeah."
Now there was a pool.
Manny learned of the pool that afternoon.
"You got a pool now?"
"Apparently."
"Can I come?"
"Fuck you."
"What color is it?"
"What color is a pool?"
"I don't know. It's your pool."
"Blue."
Manny laughed.
The boy laughed too.
This was the part he enjoyed most.
Not Denise believing him.
Manny knowing.
There was intimacy in being witnessed without being exposed.
Manny became the audience.
Soon the performance wasn't complete until Manny heard about it.

His older brother found out.
This changed things.
Brothers do not admire invention.
They possess archives.
"You told that girl you live in California?"
The boy continued eating cereal.

"Who told you?"
"Manny."
"Fucking Manny."
"Why'd you tell her that?"
"I was joking."
This was false.
"You told her for three weeks."
"It became a long joke."
His brother sat across from him.
"You know she's gonna find out."
"She probably already knows."
This possibility had occurred to him.
"What you gonna do?"
"Nothing."
"You're gonna look stupid."
"Only if I admit it."
His brother stared.
There are moments when older siblings realize the younger child may possess a defect not covered by normal family warranties.
"You're an idiot."
"Maybe."
He ate another spoonful.
His brother pointed at him.
"And you don't have a fucking pool."
"I know."
"Just making sure."

Denise did find out.
Of course she did.
This was the Bronx.
Privacy was mostly a delay.
He was sitting on the stoop when she approached.
She was smiling.
This was bad.

People bringing good news rarely smile that way.
"So."
"So what?"
"You live in California?"
"Yeah."
She looked toward his building.
"Your friend says you live there."
"What friend?"
"Some kid named Hector."
Hector.
He made a mental note.
Hector would suffer.
"I used to."
Denise folded her arms.
Used to.
Excellent.
"We moved."
"To California."
"Yeah."
"When?"
"Last year."
"Why's your mother still living there?"
"My grandmother."
Denise stared.
The grandmother defense had been deployed.
"That's your grandmother?"
"Yeah."
At that precise moment, his mother leaned from the window.
She called his name.
Not the first call.
The second.
He looked up.
His mother shouted:
"YOUR FATHER SAID GET UP HERE!"
Denise looked at him.

He looked at Denise.
There are defeats so complete that dignity requires surrender.
He began laughing.
Denise tried not to.
Failed.
"You are such a liar."
"I never said that wasn't my mother."
"You said it was your grandmother!"
"I was protecting her privacy."
Denise laughed harder.
He stood.
"Why'd you lie?"
There it was.
The question was sincere.
He could have answered sincerely.
He didn't know.
Because you didn't know me.
Because I wanted to see if I could.
Because California sounded better than the Bronx for seven minutes.
Because you were thirteen.
Because I wanted you to think I was interesting.
Because I wanted to know what it felt like to be somebody who had a pool.
Because the person I actually was seemed insufficient in that moment.
All of these answers were available somewhere inside him.
He selected none.
"It was funny."
Denise shook her head.
"You're weird."
"You said that already."
"No I didn't."
Someone else had.

He had confused the girls.
This would also happen again.
"Whatever."
She walked away smiling.
He went upstairs.
He felt embarrassed.
He also felt strangely successful.
The lie had collapsed.
Nothing terrible happened.
This was useful information.

He began reading more.
Not novels yet.
Everything.
Newspapers.
Magazines.
Baseball statistics.
Album covers.
The back of cereal boxes.
Pamphlets.
Things adults left on tables.
He read because information had become a kind of currency.
If you knew something other people didn't, you could enter conversations that otherwise excluded you.
Adults were easier to impress than children.
Children asked dangerous follow-up questions.
Adults sometimes heard a twelve-year-old use a large word and became so pleased by the spectacle that they forgot to ask whether he understood it.
He exploited this.
One afternoon his father had friends over.
They were talking about politics.
The boy listened from the kitchen.
"Carter's finished," one man said.
"Too fucking weak."

Another blamed Iran.
Someone blamed oil.
Someone blamed America itself, which seemed ambitious.
The boy entered carrying a glass of water he did not need.
"Inflation," he said.
The men looked at him.
"What?"
"Inflation is the real problem."
He had read this.
He understood perhaps half of it.
One of the men smiled.
"Listen to this kid."
His father looked proud.
The boy felt it.
That was enough.
"What do you know about inflation?"
"I know everything costs more."
Everybody laughed.
Again.
He had been serious.
His father said, "He's not wrong."
The boy sat.
Nobody told him to leave.
Knowledge had purchased admission.
He listened.
Unemployment.
Interest rates.
Gas prices.
Iran.
Reagan.
Carter.
Taxes.
Russia.
Communism.
Capitalism.

These words moved around the room like people he had seen before but hadn't been introduced to.
He collected them.

Later he asked his father:
"What's communism?"
His father answered immediately.
"Government owns everything."
"Everything?"
"Everything."
"Your clothes?"
"No."
"Then not everything."
His father sighed.
"The factories. Businesses. Property."
"People can't own houses?"
"It's more complicated than that."
The boy recognized progress.
Whenever adults moved from a simple answer to it's complicated, he knew he had reached something interesting.
"Is it bad?"
"Yes."
"Why?"
"Because people should own what they work for."
That made sense.
"What if somebody owns something but somebody else does all the work?"
His father looked at him.
"Where'd you hear that?"
"Nowhere."
"Then why are you asking?"
"I don't know."
His father leaned back.
"That's capitalism."
"What is?"

"People owning businesses."
"But I asked if somebody else does the work."
"Workers get paid."
"Who decides how much?"
"The owner."
"Why?"
"Because he owns the business."
"Why does he own it?"
"Because he bought it."
"With what?"
"Money."
"Where'd he get the money?"
His father looked toward the ceiling.
The boy waited.
Finally his father said:
"You want ice cream?"
"Yeah."
They got ice cream.
Capitalism survived.

He liked his father.
This is important.
Later memories would become complicated.
Later arguments would rearrange things.
Later disappointments would try to travel backward and contaminate earlier affection.
Memory does this constantly.
It discovers what happened later and edits what happened before.
But at twelve, sitting beside his father eating ice cream, he liked him.
His father was funny.
His father knew things.
His father sometimes didn't know things and hated admitting it.

The boy didn't yet understand that this combination described most men.
They walked home.
His father put a hand on the back of his neck.
Not affection exactly.
Or entirely affection.
Men of his father's generation sometimes delivered tenderness disguised as steering.
The boy leaned slightly into the hand.
Neither mentioned it.

By thirteen he had begun noticing clothes.
This was unfortunate because clothes cost money.
He discovered that appearance operated according to rules nobody admitted existed.
Shoes mattered.
Jeans mattered.
How your pants fell over your shoes mattered.
The condition of your sneakers mattered.
Whether the shirt was actually expensive mattered less than whether other people believed it was expensive.
This interested him enormously.
He had previously assumed clothing covered the body.
Now clothing apparently transmitted information.
Money.
Taste.
Neighborhood.
Music.
Confidence.
Sometimes sexuality.
Sometimes danger.
Sometimes the desire to appear dangerous without experiencing any of danger's administrative inconveniences.
He began studying people.

He would see a man dressed a certain way and construct an entire biography.
Drug dealer.
College student.
Cop.
Gay.
Rich.
Trying to look rich.
Trying to look poor.
Trying to look like he wasn't trying.
He became extremely confident in these classifications.
He was wrong constantly.
This did not reduce his confidence.

One Saturday he and Manny rode the train downtown.
They weren't supposed to.
Their mothers believed they were somewhere else.
Not California.
They had matured.
They said they were at each other's houses.
This is one of the oldest technologies of childhood deception and remained remarkably effective before parents possessed portable tracking devices.
There was no text message.
No photograph.
No electronic location.
No family group chat.
Two mothers in two apartments each believed her son was safely inside the other mother's apartment.
The boys were in Manhattan.
Freedom had cost one subway token.
They emerged into a different New York.
The buildings changed.
The people changed.
The clothes changed.

Even the dogs looked wealthier.
The boy noticed everything.
Women walked differently.
Men carried briefcases.
Store windows contained objects whose prices appeared almost confrontational.
People did not seem richer exactly.
They seemed less concerned with appearing as though they weren't poor.
This distinction fascinated him.
They wandered.
Nobody knew them.
That feeling returned.
Blankness.
He could be anyone here.
Manny felt it too.
"You think people can tell we're from the Bronx?"
"Why would they?"
"I don't know."
The boy adjusted his walk.
Manny saw it.
"What the fuck are you doing?"
"Nothing."
"You're walking different."
"No I'm not."
"You are."
"How?"
"Like you got something up your ass."
The boy resumed his normal walk.
"Fuck you."
They passed a clothing store.
The boy stopped.
The window was beautiful.
Not beautiful in the way he understood beautiful.
Severe.

Sparse.
A jacket occupied almost the entire display.
One jacket.
At stores near home, windows tried to convince you there was a lot to buy.
This window seemed to be telling him:
If you have to ask what else we sell, you probably shouldn't come inside.
He admired this.
Then resented it.
Then admired the resentment.
"What you looking at?"
"The jacket."
"It's ugly."
"It's not ugly."
"You'd wear that?"
"No."
"Then it's ugly."
The boy continued staring.
He wanted it.
This was irritating.
He had already decided people who spent too much money on clothes were stupid.
Wanting the jacket introduced unnecessary complexity.
"Let's go."
They walked away.
He looked back once.
Manny saw.
Said nothing.
Friendship again.

On the train home they invented futures.
Manny would own a car dealership.
The boy would be a lawyer.
"Why lawyer?"

"They make money."
"So do drug dealers."
"I don't want to be a drug dealer."
"Why not?"
"You go to jail."
"So lawyers don't go to jail?"
"Not for being lawyers."
This seemed decisive.
"What kind of lawyer?"
The boy thought.
"Criminal."
"You gonna be a criminal lawyer?"
"No, idiot. For criminals."
"Why help criminals?"
"Everybody gets a lawyer."
"Even if they did it?"
"Yeah."
"Why?"
The boy had read about this.
"Because everybody gets a defense."
"Why?"
"Because what if they didn't do it?"
"What if they did?"
He paused.
"They still get one."
"That's stupid."
"No it isn't."
"Why?"
He began explaining.
Rights.
Trials.
Evidence.
Police.
Courts.

He knew enough to sound convincing and not enough to recognize the holes.
Manny listened.
Then asked:
"What if somebody killed your mother?"
The boy stopped.
"That's different."
"Why?"
"It just is."
Manny smiled.
The boy hated that smile.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Say it."
"You always got rules until it's you."
The boy looked out the subway window.
Darkness rushed past.
Stations appeared.
Disappeared.
He wanted to answer.
He couldn't.
This irritated him more than being wrong.
He stored the question somewhere.

At home his mother asked:
"How was Manny's?"
"Good."
"What'd you do?"
"Nothing."
"What'd you eat?"
Fuck.
Food.
Every lie eventually encounters logistics.
"Sandwiches."
"What kind?"

"Turkey."
Manny's family rarely had turkey.
Why had he chosen turkey?
"His mother made them?"
"Yeah."
His mother looked at him.
He could not tell whether she knew.
This was unbearable.
Parents possessed information without disclosing sources.
"Okay."
That was it.
He went to his room.
For years afterward he would wonder whether she had known.
He never asked.
Some mysteries improve families.

His notebook had changed.
There were still baseball statistics.
Girls' names appeared more frequently.
Several were scribbled out.
One was surrounded by a heart, which he later attempted to transform into a baseball diamond.
It remained obviously a heart.
There were also sentences.
Not school sentences.
His sentences.
Things he'd heard.
Questions.
Arguments with nobody.
He wrote:
PEOPLE ACT DIFFERENT DEPENDING WHERE THEY ARE.
Then:
MAYBE EVERYBODY IS FAKE.

He stared.
That seemed too easy.
He crossed out EVERYBODY IS FAKE.
He tried:
MAYBE PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT PLACES.
He didn't like that either.
Too stupid.
He thought about California.
Downtown.
His father with his friends.
His mother asking about Manny's house.
The expensive jacket.
The criminal lawyer.
The hypothetical murder of his mother.
He wrote:
YOU CAN BELIEVE SOMETHING UNTIL IT HAPPENS TO YOU.
He liked that.
Too much.
Whenever he liked one of his own sentences too much, he became suspicious.
This was one of his better instincts.
He hadn't yet learned to apply it consistently.
Underneath, he wrote:
THEN WHAT YOU REALLY BELIEVE SHOWS UP.
He read both sentences.
They sounded intelligent.
Maybe even profound.
He imagined somebody else reading them.
That improved them.
Then he imagined Evelyn reading them.
That improved them considerably.
He closed the notebook.

A few days later he repeated the thought to Manny.
Not exactly.
He improved it.
"You don't know what somebody believes until believing it costs them something."
Manny looked at him.
"Where'd you read that?"
The boy paused.
He could have said nowhere.
He could have said he wrote it.
He could have admitted that the sentence had begun with their conversation on the train.
Instead he shrugged.
"I don't remember."
This gave the sentence provenance.
Somewhere.
A book.
An article.
A person worth quoting.
Manny nodded.
"That's pretty good."
The boy nodded too.
He felt proud.
Then guilty.
Then annoyed at himself for feeling guilty.
It was his idea.
Mostly.
Why shouldn't he make it sound better?
Was changing the wording lying?
Was pretending he'd read it somewhere lying?
Was something more true because somebody important had said it?
Would Manny have liked it as much if he'd known the boy wrote it?
He did not know.

He wanted to know.
This was becoming a problem.

That evening he stood at the window.
Other people's windows glowed across the street.
Televisions flickered.
A woman folded laundry.
A man smoked.
Someone moved behind curtains.
Somebody was arguing.
He couldn't hear the words.
Only the rhythm.
He began constructing the argument anyway.
Money.
He decided it was about money.
Maybe the husband had spent something.
Maybe the wife had found out.
Maybe there was another woman.
He had no evidence for another woman.
He added her anyway.
The argument became more interesting.
Then the curtains closed.
He was disappointed.
His mother walked behind him.
"Stop looking in people's windows."
"I'm not."
She stopped.
He was standing directly in front of a window looking directly into another window.
"Then what are you doing?"
"Looking outside."
She stared at him.
He smiled.
She shook her head and walked away.
He turned back toward the glass.

Looking outside.
Looking inside.
Same direction.
Different story.
He liked that.
He went to his notebook.
He started to write it down.
Then stopped.
It sounded better in his head.
Some things did.
Some things got better on paper.
Some got worse.
Some became true only after he wrote them.
And some were never true at all.
Those were often the most entertaining.
He closed the notebook without writing anything.
Across the street, another curtain opened.
He looked.
Not because he was nosy.
He was observing.
There was a difference.
He would explain it later.

Chapter 4

“What Everybody Knew”

By fourteen, he had begun to understand that there were two kinds of information.
Things people knew.
And things everybody knew.
The second category required substantially less evidence.
Everybody knew which blocks you didn't walk down at night.
Everybody knew which cops were assholes.
Everybody knew which teachers were stupid.
Everybody knew which girls were easy, including boys who had never spoken to them.
Everybody knew who had money.
Everybody knew who was pretending to have money.
Everybody knew which families were fucked up.
Everybody knew which fathers drank too much.
Everybody knew which mothers had been left.
Everybody knew who was gay, even when the person in question apparently had not received the announcement.
Everybody knew who was tough.
This final category interested him because toughness, unlike height, had no measuring instrument.
A boy could be six feet tall.
That was settled.
A boy could run fast.
Eventually someone found a stopwatch.
Toughness existed almost entirely inside testimony.

He had seen boys become tough because enough people said they were.
He had seen other boys lose toughness after losing one fight.
The speed of the downgrade seemed unfair.
Apparently reputation required years to build and approximately nine seconds to repossess.
This bothered him.
Mostly because he wasn't sure whether he was tough.

There were boys on the block who fought because they enjoyed fighting.
He did not understand them.
He fought when required.
Or when he believed it was required.
Or when somebody was watching.
These distinctions mattered.
He had discovered that bravery was highly sensitive to audience conditions.
Alone, he could tolerate insults with remarkable philosophical sophistication.
In front of girls, his tolerance declined sharply.
In front of older boys, it occasionally disappeared altogether.
This troubled him because he had begun reading about honor.
Honor seemed important to people who wrote books.
So did courage.
He read biographies.
Sports stories.
War stories.
Anything involving men being tested.
Tests were useful.
Tests produced scores.
Character did not.
This created anxiety.

How did you know what kind of person you were if nobody tested you?
More importantly, what if somebody tested you and the result was disappointing?
He thought about this too much.
Naturally, he told people he didn't care what anybody thought.

Music had changed.
Or he had.
Possibly both.
The older boys now carried music around as if it were evidence.
What you listened to said something.
What, exactly, remained negotiable.
He liked things he wasn't supposed to like.
This was already becoming inconvenient.
A song came through somebody's radio and he liked it immediately.
Then someone identified the artist.
His enthusiasm adjusted.
This embarrassed him.
He denied that it embarrassed him.
That embarrassed him too.
He liked hip-hop.
He also liked records with melodies that older boys described using words that made enjoying melodies sound suspiciously feminine.
He learned quickly that musical taste could be defended after the fact.
"You like that shit?"
"It's the beat."
This was useful.
The beat could pardon almost anything.
If the song became too melodic, he blamed the bass line.

If the bass line failed him, he claimed the production was interesting.
He did not yet know what production meant.
Nobody asked.
Confidence saved him again.

One afternoon a girl named Marisol had a cassette playing from an open apartment window.
The song was smoother than the records the older boys were playing downstairs.
He liked it.
Manny heard it too.
"You like that?"
"No."
"You were just nodding."
"I was thinking."
"You think with your head like that?"
The boy stopped nodding.
"Shut up."
Manny smiled.
The problem was not the music.
The problem was witnesses.
This would remain true longer than he would have liked.

His mother had begun asking where he was going.
This was irritating because he had recently become old enough to go places.
"I'm going out."
"Where?"
"Outside."
"Outside where?"
"Why does outside need an address?"
His mother stared at him.
This was not the reaction he had hoped for.
"Where are you going?"

"With Manny."
"Where?"
He began to understand that adulthood might consist largely of increasingly sophisticated answers to questions you resented being asked.
"Probably around."
"Probably around where?"
"Why don't you trust me?"
This was elegant.
He had converted a request for location into a referendum on maternal faith.
His mother was unimpressed.
"Because I know you."
This was devastating.

He had begun building identities in layers now.
Not entire invented lives.
Those were childish.
He had become subtler.
He exaggerated.
He omitted.
He rearranged chronology.
He told one group he barely cared about baseball.
Another group knew he cared about baseball more than most human institutions.
With adults, he became thoughtful.
With boys, thoughtful became dangerous if applied too visibly.
With girls, thoughtful could be useful provided it did not become strange.
At school, he occasionally became quiet because he had discovered that silence could be mistaken for depth.
This was a major breakthrough.
He had spent years talking too much and accidentally discovered the prestige of withholding.

A teacher once asked why he hadn't contributed to a class discussion.
He said:
"I was listening."
The teacher nodded approvingly.
He had actually been thinking about lunch.
This troubled him only briefly.

He was reading more seriously now.
Not systematically.
Systematic reading required discipline.
He preferred obsession.
He found a subject, disappeared into it, and emerged three weeks later believing he had discovered something civilization had somehow overlooked.
Politics.
Baseball.
War.
Psychology.
Religion.
Money.
Crime.
Race.
He read until he found enough material to support an intuition.
Then he called that research.
Contradictory information annoyed him.
At first he ignored it.
Then he learned a better technique.
He read enough of the opposing position to explain why it was wrong.
This felt objective.
It was not.
But it felt close enough to sustain him.

He had started keeping clippings.
Newspaper stories.
Columns.
Pictures.
Anything that seemed to prove something.
He did not yet know what.
The folder had no title.
This was fortunate because it contained no coherent subject.
Crime statistics sat beside baseball articles.
A column about New York schools sat beside something about tax policy.
A profile of a musician was folded around an article about the Soviet Union.
He liked juxtapositions he had not intended.
They made the world seem connected.
Sometimes it was.
Sometimes paper was just folded badly.
He did not yet know the difference.

His father noticed the clippings.
"What is all that?"
"Stuff."
"I can see it's stuff."
The family had a limited vocabulary for inquiries.
"What kind of stuff?"
"Things I'm reading."
"Why you saving it?"
He shrugged.
"Maybe I need it later."
"For what?"
He did not know.
"School."
This answer satisfied adults disproportionately.
His father nodded.
"Good."

The boy felt guilty.
Then proud.
Then annoyed at the guilt.
He was reading.
Why should motive matter?
This question would follow him everywhere.

Money had become louder in the apartment.
Not more important.
Louder.
Bills were mentioned by name.
Rent.
Telephone.
Electric.
Food.
Transportation.
Each had a personality.
The electric bill was aggressive.
The telephone bill was always somehow somebody's fault.
Food was unavoidable.
Rent possessed the dignity of weather.
It arrived.
One evening his parents argued about money in the kitchen.
Quietly at first.
The quietness made him listen harder.
His father said something about hours.
His mother said something about prices.
His father said he was doing everything he could.
His mother said nobody said he wasn't.
This was clearly untrue because her tone said precisely that.
The boy was becoming fluent in sentences whose literal meaning had no relationship with their actual function.
His father raised his voice.
His mother lowered hers.
This made her more dangerous.

The boy sat in the next room pretending to read.
He read the same paragraph six times.
His brother walked past.
"Stop listening."
"I'm reading."
"You're listening."
"How do you know?"
"Because you're on the same page."
The boy looked down.
His brother was right.
He hated this family.
Too many records.
Too many witnesses.

The next day he told Manny his father was thinking about buying a new car.
There had been no discussion of a new car.
He did not plan the lie.
It appeared.
"What kind?"
"Maybe a Buick."
Why Buick?
No idea.
Manny nodded.
"My uncle has a Buick."
"Yeah?"
"It's nice."
The boy felt relieved that his imaginary vehicle had passed inspection.
"Leather?"
"Yeah."
He had not intended leather.
Leather arrived through questioning.
"Probably."
He had learned from California.

Avoid unnecessary specifics.
"Probably" was beautiful.
It suggested access to information while preserving escape routes.
He began to appreciate language as engineering.

A week later Manny asked about the car.
"What car?"
"Your father's Buick."
The boy had forgotten.
This was the great weakness of invention.
Facts remembered themselves.
Lies required clerical support.
"Oh. He decided not to."
"Why?"
"Money."
This was true enough to feel clean.
Manny nodded.
No further questions.
The boy felt something uncomfortable.
He had invented the car because the truth had made him feel small.
Now he had killed the car with the truth.
He did not like that either.

He began noticing class without knowing the word could apply to him.
Some kids had things.
Some didn't.
Some kids worried about money.
Others seemed to experience money only as permission.
At school, a boy complained that his family had to cancel a vacation.
The boy felt immediate contempt.
Then jealousy.

Then contempt for the jealousy.
This sequence would become familiar.
"You go away every summer?" he asked.
"Usually."
"Where?"
"Different places."
The answer offended him.
Different places.
He had one place.
Home.
Apparently some people collected geography.
"That sounds boring."
The other boy looked confused.
"Traveling?"
"Doing what your parents want all summer."
This was good.
He had transformed exclusion into independence.
He felt better.
This was not insight.
It was pain with grammar.

That night he wrote:
PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF THINGS THEY CAN'T HAVE.
He liked it.
Then he thought about rich people making fun of poor people.
That did not fit.
He revised:
PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF THINGS THAT MAKE THEM FEEL SMALL.
Better.
Then he thought about things he mocked simply because they were stupid.
He added:
SOMETIMES THINGS ARE JUST STUPID.

This pleased him.
Nuance had entered.

He was becoming fascinated by contradiction.
Not his own yet.
Other people's contradictions were easier to see.
His uncle hated welfare but knew exactly which relatives should apply for benefits.
A neighbor hated landlords but wanted to buy a building.
A teacher preached independence and punished students who disagreed with her.
An older boy called everybody materialistic while cleaning his sneakers with a toothbrush.
His father complained about rich people and bought lottery tickets.
The boy began cataloging these things.
Not maliciously.
At least not entirely.
Contradiction made people interesting.
He did not yet understand that everyone looked inconsistent when observed across enough circumstances.
Consistency required editing.
Human beings were rarely afforded that luxury while alive.

He had also started arguing more.
This worried his mother.
"You always have something to say."
"Not always."
"See?"
"What?"
"That."
"What did I do?"
"You can't just let something go."
"I can."
"Then do it."

He paused.
This was a trap.
He knew it.
She knew he knew it.
He walked away.
His mother smiled.
He heard her.
"You think that's funny?"
She laughed.
He lost.

Around this time, he began spending more time with boys slightly older than him.
Older boys possessed access.
Girls.
Parties.
Stories.
Neighborhoods farther away.
They also possessed enormous quantities of misinformation.
The boy treated both categories identically.
A boy named Raul claimed he knew someone who knew Grandmaster Flash.
This was believable because the Bronx had begun shrinking socially.
Everybody knew somebody who knew somebody.
"Which one?"
"What do you mean which one?"
"Who knows him?"
"My cousin."
Of course.
"What cousin?"
Raul looked at him.
The boy remembered the prohibition.
"Never mind."
Raul continued.

"He goes to parties where Flash spins."
"Where?"
"Different places."
Different places again.
The geography of unverifiable information.
The boy nodded as if this confirmed something.
Later he repeated the story.
"My friend's cousin knows Grandmaster Flash."
By the third telling:
"My boy knows people around Flash."
By the fifth:
"I know people around that whole scene."
This was not deliberate.
Language compressed.
Proximity improved.
By telling seven, he was practically consulting on sound systems.
No internet existed to interrupt the evolution.
No phone emerged from a pocket.
No one said, "Show me."
The story lived or died based on delivery.
His delivery was excellent.

He admired that whole music world from a distance.
The DJs.
The MCs.
The clothes.
The confidence.
The sense that something belonged to the people making it before anyone else decided what it was worth.
He liked that.
But he also liked music some of those same boys dismissed.
This created a private problem.
He wanted taste to tell him who he was.
Taste refused.

One night somebody played a record he liked.
A boy beside him said:
"This is bullshit."
The boy immediately said:
"Yeah."
Then kept listening.
He hated himself for perhaps thirty seconds.
Afterward he developed an argument about why the song wasn't actually that good.
By bedtime he believed the argument.
This was a useful skill.
Potentially catastrophic.

A few months later he heard the same record alone.
He liked it again.
This annoyed him more than anything.
His own preferences were refusing party discipline.
He wrote nothing about this.
Some contradictions were interesting only when they belonged to other people.

His father took him downtown one Saturday.
Not to shop.
To handle something.
The boy did not remember later what.
What he remembered was a store window.
Clothing arranged with space around it.
Too much space.
The same principle he had noticed years earlier.
Expensive stores left room around objects.
Poor stores packed everything together.
This seemed profound.
"Why do expensive stores have less stuff?"
His father looked.
"They don't."

"Look."
His father looked again.
"They want it to look fancy."
"Why does empty look fancy?"
His father smiled.
"Because rich people like paying for air."
The boy laughed.
He remembered that sentence for years.
Not because it was true.
Because it was portable.
A good sentence could explain many things badly.
He loved those.

Later he repeated it at school.
"Rich people pay for air."
A girl asked:
"What does that mean?"
He hadn't expected analysis.
He explained store displays.
Restaurants.
Apartments.
Space.
The girl listened.
Then said:
"My parents aren't rich, and we have a big apartment."
He adjusted.
"I don't mean everybody."
This phrase would save him repeatedly.
Generalizations became much easier once exceptions were granted individually.

At fourteen, he thought intelligence meant seeing patterns.
This was partly true.
The danger was that once he began looking for patterns, he found them everywhere.

Three examples became a rule.
Two became suspicious.
One became "something to think about."
He was building a worldview with an extremely generous permitting process.
But occasionally he saw something real.
That was the problem.
If he had always been wrong, he might have become humble.
If he had always been right, he would have become unbearable.
Instead, he was right just often enough to become dangerous to himself.

One evening he sat with Manny and two older boys on the stoop.
They were discussing girls.
Which is to say they were discussing themselves using girls as evidence.
One boy said women only wanted guys with money.
He had no money.
This appeared to strengthen his expertise.
Another said girls liked assholes.
He was an asshole.
This seemed less like sociology than advertising.
Manny said nothing.
The boy listened.
Finally he said:
"Maybe girls like different things."
Everyone looked at him.
He immediately regretted the sentence.
The older boy laughed.
"Listen to Dr. Love."
"Fuck you."
"You got a girlfriend?"
"No."

"Then shut the fuck up."
This was difficult to rebut.
Experience had entered the courtroom.
The boy went quiet.
But he kept the thought.
Maybe girls liked different things.
Maybe people did.
It was not revolutionary.
Humanity had possessed the information for some time.
For him, however, it complicated everything.
Because if people liked different things, believed different things, wanted different things, and acted differently depending upon circumstances, then many of the rules everybody knew weren't rules.
They were stories people repeated because uncertainty was exhausting.
He did not formulate it that way.
He was fourteen.
What he wrote that night was:
EVERYBODY TALKS LIKE EVERYBODY IS THE SAME.
Then underneath:
NOBODY THINKS THEY ARE.
He stared at the two sentences.
He liked them.
He crossed nothing out.
This worried him.
So underneath he added:
I'M PROBABLY FULL OF SHIT.
He laughed.
Then circled it.

The next morning his mother found the notebook.
Not intentionally.
It was on the kitchen table.
He had left it there.

She opened it.
This violated several principles he had recently developed regarding privacy, although none had been communicated to her.
"What is this?"
He grabbed it.
"Nothing."
"You write all this?"
"Give it."
"I'm giving it."
"You were reading it."
"It was open."
"It wasn't open."
"It is now."
This was infuriatingly factual.
She looked at him.
"Why do you write these things?"
He shrugged.
"I don't know."
"You always don't know."
"I know."
She smiled slightly.
"What does this mean?"
She pointed to the circled sentence.
He looked.
I'M PROBABLY FULL OF SHIT.
"It means I'm probably full of shit."
She laughed.
"At least you know."
He took the notebook.
"That's the point."
"What point?"
He started to answer.
Then stopped.
He did not know.

His mother went back to what she was doing.
The conversation ended.
He remained standing there.
At least you know.
He hated how easily she had summarized something he had spent pages circling.
Adults did this occasionally.
Usually by accident.

That night he reread the notebook.
He found the sentence again.
I'M PROBABLY FULL OF SHIT.
He considered changing probably to sometimes.
More accurate.
Less harsh.
He didn't.
He had begun to enjoy the harshness.
Self-criticism felt like honesty.
This would become one of his more durable mistakes.
He believed that if he insulted himself first, nobody could accuse him of self-deception.
The possibility that cruelty toward oneself could itself become a form of dishonesty had not yet occurred to him.
That would take years.
For now, he closed the notebook.
Outside, music traveled between buildings.
Somebody shouted from a window.
A siren passed.
A car rolled by too slowly.
Someone downstairs argued about whether a record was good.
Someone else argued about whether a boy could fight.
Somewhere, somebody's cousin knew somebody important.
Everybody knew something.
Nobody knew shit.

He liked that sentence better every year.
That should have concerned him more.

Chapter 5

“The Right Kind of Wrong”

By fifteen, he had acquired enough opinions to become exhausted by other people's certainty.
He did not yet recognize the irony.
He had opinions about music.
Clothes.
Teachers.
Police.
Parents.
Girls.
Money.
Neighborhoods.
Race.
People who cared too much about race.
People who claimed not to care about race.
People who read.
People who didn't read.
People who read the wrong things.
He had opinions about people with too many opinions.
This felt balanced.

Fifteen made the city larger.
Not geographically.
Permission had expanded.
There were trains he could take without explanation.
Neighborhoods that had existed for years but had only recently become available to him.

The Bronx no longer ended where his mother stopped asking questions.
Manhattan had begun opening.
Queens had become possible.
Brooklyn was still mostly somebody else's geography.
Staten Island remained, in his mind, a ferry and rumors.
Every borough seemed to possess a personality, which was obviously nonsense and therefore commonly accepted.
The Bronx was supposedly hard.
Manhattan was supposedly sophisticated.
Queens was supposedly somewhere people moved when they wanted parking.
Brooklyn was either dangerous, Italian, Black, Hasidic, working-class, changing, or all of those things depending upon who was describing which six blocks.
Staten Island was treated by Bronx teenagers as if it had been added administratively.
He had visited almost none of it.
This did not prevent him from having positions.

Clothes became more complicated.
A year earlier he had merely wanted things.
Now he wanted the correct things.
This was worse.
Wanting could be managed.
Correctness required an audience.
He and Manny began traveling downtown simply to look.
They entered stores slowly.
Not because they were intimidated.
Because they were intimidated and trying not to communicate it through walking speed.
He had learned that there were stores in which employees approached you to help.
There were other stores in which employees approached you to determine whether help would eventually require security.

He noticed the difference immediately.
He resented it.
He also understood it.
Then resented himself for understanding it.
This was becoming the usual sequence.

They stood one afternoon outside a Charivari window.
He did not know enough about fashion to appreciate everything he saw.
This never prevented him from evaluating it.
"That shit is ugly."
Manny pointed.
"Which?"
"That."
"That's nice."
"You'd wear that?"
"Maybe."
"You look like somebody's rich aunt."
"It's a men's jacket."
"So rich uncle."
The boy kept staring.
The clothes disturbed him because they did not appear to be trying to please anyone.
He was accustomed to clothes announcing their function immediately.
Good sneakers looked like good sneakers.
A sharp jacket looked sharp.
A shirt either fit or didn't.
Here were garments that seemed to require interpretation.
He mistrusted objects requiring interpretation.
He loved books.
This contradiction escaped him.

Manny noticed a price.
"Look at that."

The boy looked.
"That's fucking stupid."
"You were just saying it was nice."
"I said the jacket was nice. I didn't say the person buying it wasn't stupid."
This distinction pleased him.
It allowed admiration without surrender.
They stayed another five minutes.
Neither went inside.
Later, telling someone about the trip, the boy said:
"We were at Charivari."
Technically true.
Language again.

He had also discovered that there were people selling clothes out of apartments.
This fascinated him more.
Someone knew someone who knew a guy in Washington Heights.
Nobody explained the supply chain.
Questions about supply chains could interrupt access.
You followed.
An apartment door opened.
Inside, the place looked less like someone's home than a department store that had forgotten to rent commercial space.
Racks.
Boxes.
Plastic garment bags.
Shoes arranged by size.
Jackets.
Sweaters.
Labels he recognized.
Labels he pretended to recognize.
Money moved quietly.

No receipt.
No sales pitch.
The apartment itself created urgency.
You had found something.
Other people had not.
That was value.
He understood that immediately.
Scarcity could be manufactured by information.
The less people knew where something came from, the more special it felt.
He bought a shirt he could barely afford.
The shirt was not life-changing.
For three days, however, he walked differently.
This was embarrassing.
Not enough to make him return it.

His mother saw the shirt.
"How much?"
He told her a lower number.
Not dramatically lower.
He had learned moderation.
She looked at him.
"How much?"
He raised the number.
Still low.
She kept looking.
This was becoming an auction.
Finally he told the truth.
"You're crazy."
"It's a good shirt."
"It's a shirt."
"It's not just a shirt."
The words escaped before he could stop them.
His mother smiled.
"Oh?"

He hated the smile.
"What is it?"
He had no answer.
Identity?
Class mobility?
Sexual signaling?
Urban belonging?
Fabric?
"It's nice."
His mother shook her head.
"Okay."
She walked away.
He stood holding a garment that had moments earlier represented something important.
Now it was a shirt again.
He resented her for this.

At school he wore it.
A girl noticed.
"That's nice."
Three words.
The shirt immediately recovered its investment value.

Music had become dangerous territory.
Not genuinely dangerous.
Teenage dangerous.
Which felt more important.
He liked hip-hop.
There was no question.
At least when asked directly.
He also liked freestyle.
This was beginning to feel like a character flaw.
Not always.
Sometimes nobody cared.
Sometimes everybody cared.

This inconsistency made it worse.
A song could come on and everyone would dance.
Another song came on, almost equally melodic, and suddenly someone declared it corny.
The border seemed arbitrary.
He studied it.
He wanted rules.
Music refused.

At a party in the Bronx, someone put on TKA.
The room changed.
Girls moved closer together.
Some guys complained.
Then stayed.
The protagonist liked the song immediately.
He did not move.
Movement was evidence.
Manny looked at him.
"Don't."
"Don't what?"
"You like it."
"I didn't say anything."
"Your face said it."
"My face doesn't talk."
"Your face loves this shit."
He laughed.
"Fuck you."
The beat continued.
Someone dragged Manny toward the middle of the room.
Manny resisted for approximately four seconds.
Then danced.
The protagonist watched.
He had developed an interesting rule:
People who danced badly should not dance.

This rule had been created entirely to protect him from dancing badly.
A girl reached for his hand.
"Come on."
"I'm good."
"What, you don't dance?"
"I dance."
"Then dance."
"I don't feel like it."
She pulled.
He went.
This was how many philosophical positions ended.

He was not terrible.
This disappointed him because terror had been useful.
He moved.
She moved.
The song was good.
Nobody laughed.
The room survived.
For several minutes, he stopped thinking about what his enjoyment meant.
This was rare.
Then someone near him yelled:
"This freestyle shit is soft."
The protagonist felt his body change before his mind did.
He stepped back slightly.
Not much.
Enough.
The girl noticed.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"You stopped."
"I'm tired."
"You've been dancing for one song."

He considered saying he had a bad knee.
Fifteen was probably too young.
"I'm hot."
This was plausible.
He left the floor.
Manny saw the entire thing.
Of course he did.

Outside, Manny lit a cigarette.
The protagonist did not smoke regularly.
He smoked socially.
This meant he smoked whenever other people smoked and criticized smokers when no one was around.
"You liked it," Manny said.
"What?"
"The music."
"Yeah."
The answer surprised both of them.
Manny smiled.
"So why'd you leave?"
"I was hot."
"Sure."
"I like hip-hop more."
"Who asked?"
The protagonist looked at him.
Nobody had.
This irritated him.
"I was just saying."
"You always just saying."
They stood quietly.
Music came through the wall.
"You like freestyle too," Manny said.
"Some."
"That's liking it."
"No. I like some songs."

"That's what liking music is."
The protagonist considered this.
Manny had become irritatingly literal.
"It's different."
"How?"
He had no answer ready.
He hated being asked questions by someone who had known him too long.
Strangers were much easier.

Around strangers, he had become more adventurous.
He could still invent.
Not California anymore.
He had standards.
Now he altered emphasis.
At one party he told people he played baseball seriously.
True enough.
At another, among boys who seemed unimpressed by sports, he described baseball as "something I used to do."
Also true enough if one accepted an unusually flexible definition of used to.
One night he met a girl from Queens.
"What do you do?"
This was a ridiculous question to ask a fifteen-year-old.
He answered anyway.
"I write."
The sentence came out naturally.
She looked interested.
"What do you write?"
He had not expected the follow-up.
"Different things."
"Like what?"
"Essays. Observations."
Observations.
Excellent word.

He wrote in notebooks.
This was not entirely fraudulent.
"You want to be a writer?"
"No."
Immediate.
Too immediate.
She smiled.
"Why'd you say it like that?"
"Like what?"
"Like being a writer is embarrassing."
He laughed.
"It's not."
"Then why don't you want to be one?"
"Because writers don't make money."
This had been learned somewhere.
She shrugged.
"Some do."
"Not most."
"So?"
He did not know what to do with so?
It appeared frequently in conversations with girls.
Boys tended to demand proof.
Girls sometimes asked why the proof mattered.
He found this more destabilizing.

"What do you want to be?" she asked.
"A lawyer."
"You told me you write."
"You can do both."
"Then why can't you be a writer?"
"I didn't say I can't."
"You said you don't want to."
"I don't."
"Why?"
"Money."

"So you want money."
"Everybody wants money."
"I don't."
He laughed.
"Bullshit."
She looked annoyed.
"I don't care about being rich."
"That's different."
"How?"
"Not caring about being rich isn't not caring about money."
She paused.
This was good.
He felt it.
"What does that mean?"
"Everybody cares about money when they don't have enough."
He liked the sentence as soon as he said it.
Too much.
She nodded.
"Maybe."
Maybe.
He hated maybe when applied to his better sentences.

Her name was Lisa.
Not the Lisa from the notebook years earlier.
This would later become confusing.
There are only so many names in an adolescence.
She asked where he lived.
"The Bronx."
No invention.
"Is it dangerous?"
He felt something immediately.
Annoyance.
Pride.
Embarrassment.

Possession.
"Some places."
"Where you live?"
"No."
He said it too quickly.
She smiled.
"No what?"
"It's not dangerous."
He wanted to say it was.
He also wanted to say it wasn't.
He wanted her to understand that he came from somewhere hard without imagining his mother barricading the door at night.
He wanted danger available as biography but not as address.
This required precision.
"You just have to know how to move."
He liked this.
It suggested experience.
"What does that mean?"
"Know where you're going."
"What happens if you don't?"
"Nothing necessarily."
Necessarily ruined the sentence.
He could hear it.
"Have you ever been robbed?"
"No."
"Beat up?"
"No."
"Shot?"
He laughed.
"Obviously not."
"So what are you talking about?"
This was unfair.
His entire neighborhood reputation had been cross-examined in thirty seconds.

"You don't understand."
This was the nuclear option.
It ended questions by converting disagreement into lack of experience.
Lisa rolled her eyes.
"Okay, Bronx."
He liked that she called him Bronx.
He pretended he didn't.

Later, telling Manny about her, he changed the story slightly.
"She was fascinated by the Bronx."
"Fascinated?"
"Yeah."
"Or she asked where you lived?"
"Same thing."
It was not.
But he preferred his version.
Manny had begun to enjoy this openly.
He no longer corrected the protagonist immediately.
Sometimes he waited.
This made it funnier.

There was a boy named Luis who knew a boy who knew somebody from Staten Island connected to the Force MCs.
That was the entire relationship.
It would later become more elaborate through retelling.
At first:
"My friend's boy knows one of the Force MCs."
Then:
"One of my boys hangs with the Force MCs."
Eventually:
"I know people around them."
Again, no single sentence contained enough dishonesty to trigger alarm.
Proximity simply improved with age.

The protagonist met one of them briefly.
Very briefly.
A hello.
Maybe a handshake.
People were around.
Music was playing.
Nobody stopped time.
He did not become part of music history.
He met a guy.
That was all.
The next day, however, he possessed something.
A story.
The story was better than the encounter.
This frequently happens.

"You met him?" Manny asked.
"Yeah."
"What'd you talk about?"
"Nothing really."
This was true.
Then the protagonist felt the story becoming insufficient.
"We talked music a little."
Manny smiled.
There it was.
"What music?"
"Just shit."
"Did he ask whether you like freestyle?"
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.

The protagonist read more now because reading made him harder to corner.
If someone mentioned a subject, he wanted something available.
Iran.

Reagan.
Run-D.M.C.
Crime.
The Yankees.
Tax cuts.
School segregation.
The Soviet Union.
The Knicks.
AIDS.
He read whatever touched his life and several things that didn't.
His method remained flawed.
He looked for confirmation.
But he had improved at disguising it.
He began reading opposing views.
Sometimes carefully.
This created a new problem.
Occasionally they made sense.
He hated this.
He could handle wrong people.
Reasonable disagreement was much more inconvenient.

One teacher assigned an essay about capital punishment.
The protagonist supported it.
Strongly.
He knew exactly why.
Some crimes were so terrible that society had the right to kill the person who committed them.
Simple.
He began researching.
He found arguments supporting him.
Justice.
Deterrence.
Retribution.
Protection.

He wrote notes.
Then he encountered wrongful convictions.
This irritated him.
Wrongful convictions were unfair to the argument.
He read more.
Errors.
Race.
Class.
Bad lawyers.
Police misconduct.
Witnesses being wrong.
The death penalty remained satisfying only if the legal system never made mistakes.
The legal system plainly made mistakes.
He tried to solve this.
"Only when there's absolute proof."
He wrote that.
Then stared.
Absolute proof.
Who decided?
He crossed it out.
He became angry at the assignment.

At dinner he asked his father:
"You believe in the death penalty?"
"Yes."
"What if they kill an innocent person?"
"Then they fucked up."
The boy stared.
"That's it?"
"What else you want me to say?"
"But you can't fix that."
"No."
"So how can you support it?"
His father looked at him.

"You support it."
"I know."
"Then answer your own question."
This was disrespectful.
Parents were supposed to defend positions so children could attack them.
His father had returned the package.
The boy did not appreciate this.

His mother listened.
"What do you think?" he asked her.
"I don't know."
He almost laughed.
"You don't know?"
"No."
"How can you not know?"
"Because I don't know."
This seemed irresponsible.
Everyone should possess a position.
"What if someone killed your child?"
His mother stopped eating.
The question changed the room.
He regretted it immediately.
"I would want to kill them myself."
He nodded.
There.
Then she continued.
"Doesn't mean the government should."
He looked at her.
This was not helpful.
"That's contradictory."
"So?"
Again.
So.
His mother went back to eating.

He stared at his plate.
He wanted consistency.
The adults in his life kept offering humanity instead.
He mistook this for intellectual laziness.

In the essay he wrote both arguments.
The teacher praised him for nuance.
He had not been nuanced.
He had been unable to decide.
This taught him something dangerous:
Confusion presented elegantly could resemble wisdom.

He began using this.
When uncertain, he said:
"It's complicated."
People nodded.
Sometimes it was complicated.
Sometimes he simply didn't know.
The phrase covered both.

He went to another party.
Different neighborhood.
Different crowd.
Someone played hip-hop.
He relaxed.
No identity crisis.
He knew what to do here.
He liked this.
Then someone played freestyle.
He liked that too.
He stayed.
Nobody cared.
This confused him.
He had expected conflict.
There was none.

A girl danced.
A guy who had spent the previous hour arguing about Rakim danced too.
The protagonist watched.
This information should have liberated him.
Instead he wondered whether this particular group had bad taste.
Human beings can protect a problem from solution if sufficiently committed.

Later, on the train, Manny said:
"You notice nobody gives a shit?"
"About what?"
"What you like."
"Who said they did?"
Manny turned toward him.
"You."
"I never said that."
"You don't have to."
The protagonist looked out the window.
Dark tunnel.
His reflection appeared in the glass.
He watched himself.
This was uncomfortable.
He turned away.

Around this period he discovered something else.
He could become funnier by making himself the joke first.
This was useful socially.
If his clothes were cheap, he could say it first.
If he struck out, he could exaggerate how badly.
If a girl rejected him, he could turn the rejection into a story.
People laughed.
He controlled the humiliation.
This felt powerful.

He began practicing.
"I'm an idiot."
People laughed.
"I'm full of shit."
People laughed harder.
"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."
Now everyone related.
Self-deprecation gave him permission to confess without appearing vulnerable.
He loved it.
He did not notice that repetition was teaching his internal voice the same vocabulary.
Humor enters the body through more than one door.

One night he wrote:
IF I SAY THE WORST THING ABOUT ME FIRST, NOBODY CAN USE IT AGAINST ME.
He liked this.
Then added:
BUT I'M STILL USING IT AGAINST ME.
He stared.
That sentence bothered him.
He crossed it out.
The first sentence remained.
It was funnier.
At fifteen, funny usually won.

New York continued teaching without accepting responsibility for the curriculum.
A man with expensive clothes could be broke.
A man with dirty clothes could have money.
A girl from Manhattan could be frightened of the Bronx while the protagonist was frightened of walking into her building and meeting the doorman.

A politician could promise to help working people while arguing for policies his father said hurt working people.
His father could be wrong.
His mother could admit she didn't know and somehow become more credible.
A teacher could know more than him and still say something stupid.
A stupid person could occasionally say something brilliant.
This last category was deeply unfair.
He preferred intelligence to remain properly licensed.

He had started going into Manhattan more often.
Sometimes just walking.
The city allowed observation without purchase.
He could stand outside restaurants.
Look into stores.
Watch people entering clubs he was too young to enter.
Clothes mattered even more at night.
Lines formed.
People approached doors differently depending upon whether they expected admission.
Confidence became visible from fifty feet away.
So did money.
So did desperation.
The protagonist studied all three.
He wanted in.
He also wanted not to care about getting in.
This was becoming a recurring architecture.
Want.
Deny wanting.
Judge people who openly want.
Try to get.
If unsuccessful, redefine the thing as stupid.
He was becoming efficient.

One night, looking at a line outside a club, Manny said:
"Everybody looks like they're trying too hard."
The protagonist agreed.
"Exactly."
They were both wearing their best clothes.
Neither acknowledged this.

The city smelled different at night.
Exhaust.
Food.
Perfume.
Garbage.
Cigarettes.
Rain on hot pavement.
Subway air rising through grates.
The protagonist loved it.
He would not have used the word love.
Love sounded sentimental.
He said New York was interesting.
This was safer.
Sometimes he imagined leaving.
He also imagined anybody who left secretly wanting to return.
He had no evidence.
Home often disguises possession as insight.

On the train back to the Bronx, he found a newspaper somebody had left on the seat.
He picked it up.
Manny laughed.
"You can't help yourself."
"What?"
"Reading people's garbage."
"It's a newspaper."
"That somebody threw away."

"They left it."
"Same shit."
The protagonist opened it.
"Not the same."
"Why?"
"Because throwing something away means you don't want it. Leaving it means maybe you forgot it."
Manny looked at him.
"You ever just say, 'Yeah, maybe'?"
"Yeah."
"When?"
The protagonist tried to remember.
Manny smiled.
"Exactly."

He read.
An article about crime.
Another about Reagan.
Sports.
Business.
He moved between sections without hierarchy.
The city appeared more coherent in print.
Numbers.
Quotes.
Headlines.
Causes.
Effects.
People assigned responsibility.
He liked newspapers for this.
Newspapers turned chaos into columns.
He had not yet learned that columns required choices.
What went first.
Who got quoted.
What got cut.
Which facts belonged together.

Which didn't.
He trusted structure too easily.
He was fifteen.
Adults did too.

At home he clipped an article.
It supported something he believed.
He put it in the folder.
Then noticed another article on the reverse side.
It complicated the first.
He read half.
Stopped.
Folded the clipping so the inconvenient article faced inward.
He did not think of this as dishonesty.
He was organizing.

His notebook that night contained three lines:
EVERYBODY WANTS THE TRUTH UNTIL THE TRUTH FUCKS UP THEIR STORY.
Underneath:
THIS PROBABLY INCLUDES ME.
He paused.
Then, without crossing it out, wrote:
ESPECIALLY ME IF I'M BEING HONEST.
He read it.
It sounded mature.
That pleased him.
He did not notice that he had just congratulated himself for admitting he was capable of self-deception.
This is one of the more elegant services ego provides.
It can convert awareness of a flaw into evidence of superiority.
He closed the notebook feeling slightly wiser.
Outside, somebody's radio was playing.
He recognized the song.

Freestyle.
He liked it.
No one was in the room.
He let himself like it completely.
For almost a minute.
Then he imagined someone walking in.
He turned the radio down.
No one had.
He laughed at himself.
Then turned it back up.
Progress is frequently pathetic when observed closely.
Still.
It counted.

Chapter 6

“The People Who Knew Better”

By sixteen, he had become very good at first impressions.
Second impressions were less reliable.
This was partly because first impressions allowed preparation.
Second impressions required maintenance.
He could enter a room and decide, within seconds, which version of himself would be most useful.
Funny.
Serious.
Street.
Quiet.
Intellectual.
Athlete.
Indifferent.
Interested but not too interested.
Poor enough to be authentic.
Not so poor as to seem deprived.
Confident.
Self-deprecating.
Mysterious.
He had not yet discovered that mysterious people usually speak less.
This slowed development.
The people who knew him longest found the whole thing entertaining.
Not always admirable.

Not always harmless.
But entertaining.
Manny had begun watching introductions the way other people watched fights.

At a party, a girl asked where he went to school.
He told her.
Then added:
"But I'm probably transferring."
He had no intention of transferring.
Manny, standing ten feet away, heard this.
The girl asked where.
The protagonist paused.
"Private."
Manny turned away.
His shoulders started moving.
The protagonist saw him.
This was dangerous.
"What school?"
"Still deciding."
"Why are you transferring?"
"Better academics."
Manny made a coughing noise.
The protagonist continued.
"And baseball."
This gave the lie infrastructure.
"You're good?"
He shrugged.
"Depends who you ask."
This was one of his favorite answers.
It suggested humility while preserving the possibility that knowledgeable people considered him exceptional.
The girl smiled.
Manny left the room before he destroyed everything.

Outside later, Manny could barely speak.
"Private school?"
"Fuck you."
"Better academics?"
"I said maybe."
"You said probably."
"Same thing."
"No, it isn't."
"Close enough."
"Where you transferring?"
The protagonist laughed.
"I don't know yet."
Manny bent over.
The protagonist began laughing too.
This was the unusual thing about his lies.
He enjoyed being exposed by the right people.
A stranger exposing him felt threatening.
A friend exposing him felt intimate.
There are people before whom dignity becomes unnecessary.
These people are rare.
He did not yet understand their value.

His mother understood almost every version of him.
This made lying to her difficult.
He still attempted it.
One Friday evening:
"Where are you going?"
"Party."
"Where?"
"Queens."
"What part?"
He told her.
"Whose party?"
"A friend."
"What friend?"

"Why do you need his Social Security number?"
She stared.
He adjusted.
"Tony."
She waited.
He knew what came next.
"Tony who?"
He supplied a last name.
This one belonged to an actual Tony.
A breakthrough.
"How do you know him?"
"Through Manny."
Manny had become an enormous administrative resource.
His mother nodded.
"What time are you coming home?"
"Twelve."
"Eleven."
"Twelve."
"Eleven-thirty."
"Fine."
They had negotiated successfully.
He went to his room.
His father looked up from the television.
"You going somewhere?"
"Queens."
"What for?"
"Party."
"Be careful."
That was it.
The protagonist noticed the difference.
His mother wanted data.
His father wanted assurance.
At sixteen he interpreted this as his father trusting him more.
Years later he would wonder whether his mother simply understood danger differently.

At sixteen, nuance was usually postponed whenever a flattering interpretation was available.

The party was nowhere near where he had told his mother.
This required no technology to manage.
No phone would vibrate in his pocket asking where he was.
No map placed a blinking dot beside his name.
No photograph appeared in real time.
No one tagged him in anything.
His location existed only inside the memories of the people physically present.
This was freedom.
It was also vulnerability.
He did not know the difference yet.

The apartment was crowded.
Too many people.
Bad ventilation.
Good music.
Somebody had moved furniture against the walls.
Cups everywhere.
A girl was arguing in the hallway.
A boy was explaining something loudly to someone who was no longer listening.
The protagonist felt immediately comfortable.
Crowded rooms gave him options.
He could become whichever version of himself received the best response.
He found Manny.
Manny pointed toward a girl.
"Queens."
"What about her?"
"She asked about you."
The protagonist felt his entire nervous system reorganize while his face attempted boredom.

"What'd she say?"
Manny smiled.
There.
He had failed.
"You care now?"
"Just asking."
"She said, 'Who's your friend?'"
"That's it?"
"What you want, a proposal?"
The protagonist adjusted his shirt.
Manny watched.
"You look fine."
"I didn't ask."
"Exactly."

The girl's name was Ana.
She was from Jackson Heights.
He liked the way she spoke.
Not because of the accent.
He would later insist it was not the accent.
It was partly the accent.
She asked:
"You're from the Bronx?"
"Yeah."
"What part?"
He told her.
She nodded.
"My cousin lives over there."
The protagonist felt strangely disappointed.
He preferred when the Bronx carried mystery.
A cousin ruined mythology.
"What street?"
She told him.
He knew it.
"That's not really my area."

It was close enough.
He needed distance.
"Still the Bronx."
"It's different."
"How?"
He started explaining.
Blocks.
People.
Schools.
Train lines.
He could transform four avenues into separate civilizations.
Ana listened.
Then said:
"You guys always do that."
"Who?"
"Bronx people."
"What do we do?"
"Act like every six blocks is another country."
He laughed.
"Because it is."
She rolled her eyes.
He liked her.

Music changed.
Hip-hop.
He knew the record.
He relaxed.
Ana moved closer to the room where people were dancing.
"You dance?"
"Yeah."
Manny, passing behind her, made a face.
The protagonist ignored him.
Ana said:
"Come on."
He followed.

This time there was no resistance.
Hip-hop did not create the same internal trial.
He understood himself here.
At least he thought he did.
A few songs later the DJ changed direction.
Freestyle.
The protagonist recognized it immediately.
Ana smiled.
"Oh, I love this."
He felt something old begin moving.
Not embarrassment exactly.
Calculation.
Manny appeared at the edge of the room.
He had detected weather.
The protagonist saw him.
Manny smiled.
Ana started dancing.
The protagonist stayed.
Manny's smile widened.
The protagonist gave him a tiny middle finger.
Manny nearly collapsed.

Ana said:
"What?"
"Nothing."
"You looking at your friend."
"He's an asshole."
Manny nodded from across the room as though introduced.
Ana laughed.
The protagonist danced.
He liked the song.
This was now becoming less difficult.
Not easy.
Less difficult.
There is a difference.

He still possessed a private hierarchy in which hip-hop seemed more defensible.
Freestyle remained vulnerable to cross-examination.
But the girl was pretty.
This softened doctrine.

Outside later, Manny lit a cigarette.
The protagonist asked for one.
"You don't smoke."
"I smoke."
"You smoke my cigarettes."
"That's smoking."
Manny handed him one.
They stood outside.
"You looked happy in there."
"Yeah."
"With the freestyle."
The protagonist inhaled badly and coughed.
Manny waited.
"Don't start."
"I didn't say anything."
"Your face did."
"My face doesn't talk."
Manny laughed.
"You used that already."
The protagonist hated when friends remembered material.

He was reading more than ever.
The reading had become almost competitive.
He wanted to know before being told.
If somebody mentioned a book, he wanted to have read it.
If somebody referenced a politician, he wanted context.
If someone used a word he did not know, he quietly remembered it and looked it up later.
He hated being caught uninformed.

The hatred drove learning.
This worked surprisingly well.
Bad motives occasionally produce excellent habits.
He mistook the result for proof the motive was healthy.

He began reading philosophy without knowing he was reading philosophy.
Essays.
Ideas.
Arguments about morality, freedom, power, religion, human nature.
He did not yet have a canon.
This was fortunate.
He moved between serious writers and complete bullshit without respecting the distinction.
A newspaper columnist could sit beside an old philosopher.
A sportswriter could provoke more thought than either.
He trusted whatever sentence made him stop.
This was intellectually irresponsible.
It was also alive.

One afternoon he read an argument about personal responsibility.
He loved it.
Immediately.
People made choices.
Choices had consequences.
Simple.
Clean.
Useful.
He clipped the article.
That same week he read about neighborhoods where schools were underfunded, jobs disappeared, housing deteriorated, and crime concentrated.
This complicated his first enthusiasm.

He did not like complication when it arrived after clarity.
He wrote:
PEOPLE MAKE CHOICES BUT THEY DON'T CHOOSE ALL THEIR OPTIONS.
He stared.
This seemed good.
Then:
BUT BAD OPTIONS ARE STILL OPTIONS.
He stared longer.
Then:
THAT DOESN'T MAKE THEM GOOD OPTIONS.
He became annoyed.
The notebook had begun arguing with itself.

His older brother read the page.
"What is this?"
"Give me that."
"You writing to yourself?"
"Give it."
His brother held it away.
"You're having an argument with nobody."
"Exactly."
"That's crazy."
"It's not crazy."
"You're literally disagreeing with yourself."
The protagonist grabbed the notebook.
"That means I'm thinking."
His brother laughed.
"It means you're losing an argument by yourself."
This was excellent.
The protagonist hated him for saying it first.

He started using the line later.
"I can lose an argument by myself."
People laughed.

He never credited his brother.
This is how culture develops.

At school he got into an argument about affirmative action.
He knew enough to be dangerous.
Not enough to be careful.
Someone said it was unfair.
Someone else said racism had already made everything unfair.
The protagonist understood both arguments and disliked both speakers.
This complicated alignment.
He said:
"What if you're fixing discrimination with discrimination?"
A girl answered:
"What if pretending everybody starts from the same place is discrimination too?"
He paused.
Good question.
He did not acknowledge this.
Instead he said:
"That's not what I said."
This gave him time.
"What are you saying?"
He began reconstructing the argument as he spoke.
This was one of his gifts.
He could build the airplane after takeoff.
Sometimes it landed.
Sometimes everyone died.

Afterward he kept thinking about her question.
Not because he admitted she had changed his mind.
He would have resisted that phrasing.
She had given him something to "consider."
This preserved sovereignty.

He read more.
Found writers supporting his original concern.
Relief.
Then found writers supporting hers.
Annoyance.
He wrote notes.
He began to notice that intelligent people could start from different assumptions and reason coherently toward different answers.
This was deeply inconvenient.
He preferred stupidity.
Stupidity was easier to defeat.

He wrote:
MAYBE MOST ARGUMENTS ARE REALLY ABOUT WHICH FACTS MATTER MOST.
Then:
OR WHICH FEARS.
He liked that.
Then became suspicious because he liked it.
He added:
OR MAYBE THAT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE SAY WHEN THEY'RE TOO CHICKENSHIT TO PICK A SIDE.
There.
Balance restored.

The city was teaching him class in increasingly specific ways.
He knew kids whose parents discussed college as if it were weather.
Not whether.
Where.
He knew others for whom college was discussed like a distant country.
Possible.
Maybe.

Expensive.
Complicated.
He belonged somewhere between certainty and impossibility.
This made him observant and resentful in alternating proportions.
He could visit a wealthier kid's apartment and admire the quiet.
Quiet had become a luxury he had never previously considered.
Then he would judge the family for being disconnected from "real life."
Real life, conveniently, resembled his.
This was one of his favorite definitions.

At one apartment, there were books everywhere.
Not schoolbooks.
Books chosen intentionally.
He liked that.
The parents asked what he was reading.
He told them.
They listened seriously.
No one laughed because a teenager had an opinion.
This unsettled him.
He had prepared defensiveness and found no target.
The father asked:
"What do you think?"
The protagonist answered.
The father disagreed.
Politely.
Then asked another question.
The protagonist revised his answer.
Nobody declared victory.
He left confused.
On the train he thought:

Rich people have time to talk like that.
Then he realized the family might not be rich.
They simply had a nice apartment.
He had assumed.
He hated catching himself assuming because he had become excellent at catching others.

Back home, a neighbor said:
"Those people downtown don't know shit about how we live."
The protagonist agreed.
Then remembered the apartment.
They had seemed curious.
Was curiosity enough?
Probably not.
Could someone understand a life without living it?
He thought yes when reading books.
No when discussing neighborhoods.
This contradiction sat quietly.
He did not invite it to speak.

His father was increasingly worried about the city.
Crime.
Jobs.
Drugs.
Things changing.
The protagonist listened.
Some of it felt true.
Some exaggerated.
He had begun noticing that adults could be simultaneously observant and afraid.
Fear sharpened certain details and distorted others.
He did not yet know how to separate them.
Neither did they.

One evening his father said:

"This city is going to hell."
The protagonist asked:
"Compared to when?"
His father looked at him.
"What?"
"When was it better?"
"When I was younger."
"How do you know it was better?"
"I was there."
"That doesn't mean it was better."
His father stared.
The protagonist continued, encouraged by danger.
"Maybe you just liked being younger."
Silence.
His mother covered a smile.
His father pointed at him.
"One day you're gonna understand."
The protagonist smiled.
"That's what people say when they don't want to explain."
His mother laughed.
Wrong audience.
His father did too, eventually.
The protagonist felt triumphant.
He had no idea whether he was correct.
Humor sometimes awarded victories before truth finished counting.

He started going farther.
Manhattan at night.
Queens parties.
Occasional trips into Brooklyn with people who knew where they were going.
Brooklyn surprised him by failing to be one thing.
He had been promised one borough.
He encountered several.

Brownstones.
Industrial streets.
Black neighborhoods.
Italian neighborhoods.
Caribbean neighborhoods.
Hasidic streets.
Bars.
Clubs.
Empty blocks.
Crowded avenues.
The city kept refusing summary.
This annoyed him less now.
He had begun enjoying exceptions.
Exceptions gave him material.

There were clubs he was still too young to enter.
This did not stop him from knowing about them.
The Fun House.
The Roxy.
Places older kids talked about as if merely entering them altered your biography.
Stories traveled back uptown.
The DJ was incredible.
The crowd was crazy.
Somebody met somebody.
Somebody danced until morning.
Somebody got thrown out.
Somebody knew the promoter.
Somebody definitely did not know the promoter but said he did.
Information came through cousins, older brothers, friends of friends, girls who dated older guys.
The protagonist absorbed all of it.
By sixteen, he could describe certain clubs he had never entered with alarming confidence.

This was training.

"You been there?" Ana asked him once.
They were talking about the Fun House.
"Not really."
This answer deserved study.
"How do you not really go somewhere?"
"I've been around it."
"Outside?"
"Yeah."
She laughed.
"So you haven't been."
"I didn't say I had."
"You made it sound like you had."
"That's your interpretation."
She stared.
He smiled.
"You're ridiculous."
He liked her too much.

He had begun discovering something about women.
They did not necessarily find his bullshit less believable than men.
They simply seemed more willing to tell him they knew it was bullshit.
This threatened the entire enterprise.
It also attracted him.

Ana asked:
"Why do you do that?"
"What?"
"Make everything sound bigger."
"I don't."
"See?"
"That's not an answer."

"You always know somebody, almost went somewhere, almost did something, could've done something."
He laughed.
"Not always."
"Okay."
The okay was devastating.
Not agreement.
Dismissal.
He wanted to argue.
Instead he asked:
"You don't think I'm interesting?"
The sentence escaped.
He hated it immediately.
There it was.
Too naked.
Ana looked at him differently.
"I think you're interesting when you're not trying so hard."
He felt insulted.
Then exposed.
Then angry because exposure felt like insult.
"Who says I'm trying?"
Ana smiled.
He wanted to leave.
He stayed.

That night he thought about the conversation.
He reconstructed it in his favor.
She misunderstood him.
She was insecure.
She didn't get his humor.
She was trying to make him feel small.
All plausible.
Then another possibility appeared.
She was right.
He rejected this.

Then reopened it.
Then rejected it more intelligently.
This counted as growth in some systems.

He wrote:
IF YOU NEED EVERYBODY TO THINK YOU'RE SOMETHING, MAYBE YOU DON'T BELIEVE IT YET.
He stared.
Did not like the implications.
Below it:
OR MAYBE PEOPLE JUST LIKE TO BE SEEN.
Better.
Then:
BOTH CAN BE TRUE.
He circled that.
He had begun enjoying "both can be true."
This phrase allowed contradictions to coexist without being solved.
Useful.
Sometimes profound.
Sometimes lazy.
He had not yet learned to tell.

A month later, he was at another party.
Different room.
Different people.
Someone asked what he wanted to do with his life.
"Write."
He said it without thinking.
Then corrected himself.
"Maybe law."
The person asked:
"Which?"
He laughed.
"I don't know."

This answer felt strangely clean.
No architecture.
No performance.
Just uncertainty.
He expected to feel diminished.
He didn't.
The conversation moved on.
Nobody punished him.
He remembered this.

The next day Manny asked:
"How was the party?"
"Good."
"Who were you?"
The protagonist looked at him.
"What?"
"Who'd you tell everybody you were this time?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Me."
Manny nodded solemnly.
"Getting lazy."
They both laughed.
Then Manny said:
"That's probably the hardest one."
The protagonist stopped.
Manny had already moved on.
"What?"
"What?"
"What'd you say?"
"I don't know."
"You just said—"
"I don't remember."
Manny smiled.
The protagonist looked at him.
"You do that shit on purpose."

"What shit?"
"Say something smart and act like you didn't."
"Maybe I'm deep."
"You're not."
"Fuck you."
Friendship restored.

That evening, the protagonist sat by the window with the notebook.
He thought about Ana.
His father.
The apartment downtown.
The parties.
The arguments.
His different versions.
The music.
The stupid private debate about whether liking freestyle weakened some imaginary case he was building for himself.
He wrote:
I'M DIFFERENT WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE.
Then:
THAT DOESN'T MEAN ALL OF THEM ARE FAKE.
He paused.
Then:
BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN ALL OF THEM ARE ME EITHER.
He stared at that one.
He wanted to cross it out.
Didn't.
Outside, somebody had music playing.
He recognized the beat.
Hip-hop.
He smiled.
Then another car passed with freestyle loud enough to interrupt it.
For a few seconds both songs occupied the street at once.

Neither won.
He listened until one car disappeared.
Then the other.
The street became quiet.
Not actually quiet.
Bronx quiet.
Which meant somebody was arguing three buildings away and a siren was approaching.
He closed the notebook.
He was sixteen.
He had begun asking who he was.
This would have been easier if he had been only one person.

Chapter 7

“The Problem With Being Right”

At sixteen, he discovered that being right could make him feel almost as good as being loved.
This was unfortunate.
Love required another person.
Being right could be manufactured alone.
He had enough books, newspapers, notebooks, remembered arguments, overheard conversations, and selectively organized evidence to build small private courtrooms whenever necessary.
The prosecution was vigorous.
The defense was usually incompetent.
The judge looked familiar.

He had become better at argument.
Not necessarily better at truth.
There is a difference.
Argument rewards speed.
Truth often requires embarrassment.
He preferred speed.
If someone said something careless, he could find the weak seam immediately.
Pull.
Separate the claim from whatever dignity had been attached to it.
This impressed people.
Sometimes.

Other times it made them want to hit him.
He considered both reactions evidence that he had touched something important.
This was convenient.

A teacher once said:
"People need to learn to respect authority."
The protagonist raised his hand.
The teacher looked tired before calling on him.
"Why?"
"Why what?"
"Why should authority automatically deserve respect?"
"I didn't say automatically."
"You kind of did."
"I said people need to learn to respect authority."
"Right. Why?"
The teacher sighed.
"Because society needs rules."
"That's respecting rules."
A few students turned.
This improved him.
"Authority enforces rules."
"Bad rules too."
The teacher folded his arms.
"Do you have a point?"
The protagonist did now.
He had not when he began.
"If authority gets respect just because it's authority, how do you know when authority is wrong?"
The room changed slightly.
Not dramatically.
Nobody gasped.
No violin began playing.
A girl in the back stopped writing.
The teacher said:

"You question authority when necessary."
"Who decides necessary?"
"You do."
"Then you're saying respect your own judgment more than authority."
Several students laughed.
The teacher looked at him.
The protagonist felt the warm internal electricity of victory.
He had him.
Then the teacher said:
"You enjoy this too much."
The class laughed harder.
The protagonist smiled.
"Enjoy what?"
"Winning."
"I'm just asking questions."
"No. You're asking questions you think you already know the answer to."
The protagonist stopped smiling.
This was inappropriate.
Teachers were not supposed to analyze motive in public.
"That's not true."
"Maybe."
He hated maybe.

He thought about the exchange all day.
Not the authority part.
The other part.
You enjoy this too much.
He considered whether enjoyment invalidated an argument.
Obviously not.
A boxer could enjoy punching someone and still land correctly.
This analogy satisfied him.
Then bothered him.

He did not want argument to be punching.
Unless he was good at it.
He wrote nothing.

His father enjoyed arguing too.
This made their conversations increasingly dangerous.
Two men can call something "discussion" long after every neutral observer has evacuated.
They argued politics at dinner.
Money.
Crime.
Schools.
Race.
Whether baseball players were overpaid.
Whether unions protected workers or protected bad workers.
Whether Reagan was helping the country.
Whether Reagan was helping people who already had money.
Whether helping people with money eventually helped everybody else.
Whether "everybody else" was a serious category.
The protagonist knew more now.
His father knew more than he admitted.
Neither knew as much as he sounded like he knew.
This was a balanced household.

One night his father said:
"People need to stop making excuses."
The protagonist looked up.
"About what?"
"Everything."
This was broad.
"What does that even mean?"
"You know what it means."
"No, I don't."

"You do something wrong, take responsibility."
"Okay."
"That's it."
"What if the reason matters?"
"The reason always matters to the person making the excuse."
The protagonist liked that sentence.
Unfortunately he disagreed with it.
"What if somebody steals because they're hungry?"
"They still stole."
"That wasn't my question."
"Your question doesn't change what happened."
"Neither does your answer."
His mother stopped eating for half a second.
Danger signal.
His father noticed.
"So what are you saying? Stealing is okay if you're hungry?"
"No."
"Then what are you arguing?"
The protagonist opened his mouth.
Nothing arrived.
He had reached that unpleasant point where the other person wanted the actual position rather than the attack.
"I'm saying why matters."
"Of course why matters."
"Then why'd you say people make excuses?"
"Because understanding why somebody did something doesn't mean they get a pass."
The protagonist stared.
His father continued eating.
This was aggravating.
It was almost exactly what he had been trying to say.
Only cleaner.
He resented him for it.

Later, in his room, he wrote:
EXPLANATION IS NOT EXCUSE.
He looked at it.
Then:
BUT PEOPLE USE EXPLANATION AS EXCUSE ALL THE TIME.
Then:
INCLUDING ME.
He stared.
He almost crossed out the last line.
Instead he wrote:
ESPECIALLY WHEN I HAVE A GOOD EXPLANATION.
That was worse.
He left it.

He had started spending more time with Ana.
Not officially.
Officially implied rules.
They saw each other.
Talked on the phone.
Met at parties.
Walked around.
Sometimes kissed.
Nobody used the word girlfriend.
This allowed both of them to behave as though uncertainty were sophistication.
It was mostly fear.

Ana liked asking him questions.
He liked answering until the answer required something unpolished.
One evening they sat on a bench after dark.
People passed.
Cars passed.
The city kept participating without permission.

She asked:
"What are you scared of?"
He laughed.
This was his first response to many serious questions.
"I'm serious."
"I don't know."
"Yes you do."
"Getting shot."
"That's not what I mean."
"It's a legitimate fear."
"You know what I mean."
He looked away.
"Failing, I guess."
"At what?"
"Everything."
She laughed.
"That's dramatic."
"You asked."
"What does failing mean?"
He disliked this.
Questions that required definitions were dangerous.
"Not doing what I'm capable of."
"How do you know what you're capable of?"
"I know."
"How?"
He looked at her.
She waited.
This was unfair.
"I just do."
She smiled.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Say it."
"You sound like everybody you make fun of."
He felt irritation rise immediately.

"How?"
"You always say people don't know shit, but you know exactly what you're capable of?"
"That's different."
"Why?"
Because it was him.
He did not say this.

He began constructing a better answer.
Talent.
Work.
Potential.
Teachers.
Baseball.
Grades.
Things people had told him.
She listened.
Then said:
"So if you don't become whatever version of yourself you think you're supposed to become, you failed?"
"Kind of."
"That sounds miserable."
He laughed.
"It's motivation."
"Maybe."
Maybe.
Again.
He was beginning to suspect the word had been invented specifically to injure him.

"What's wrong with wanting more?" he asked.
"Nothing."
"Then what are you saying?"
"I'm saying you talk like your life is a test."
He looked at her.

"Everybody's life is."
"Who grades it?"
He had no answer.
This irritated him because she did not appear particularly impressed by having created the problem.
She simply looked ahead.
He wanted to tell her she was wrong.
Instead he said:
"That's a stupid question."
She smiled.
"Okay."
He hated okay more than maybe.

They kissed a few minutes later.
This prevented further philosophical progress.

Baseball had become more serious.
Not professionally serious.
Teenage serious.
Which was capable of feeling larger.
He was good enough for people to expect things.
Expectation changed the game.
A ground ball was no longer merely a ground ball.
It could become evidence.
A strikeout could travel home with him.
An error could remain in his body long after everyone else forgot.
He told people he played because he loved baseball.
True.
He also played because baseball gave him scores.
Statistics.
Results.
Something outside his own head capable of declaring whether he had succeeded.
This was less romantic.

He did not write it down.

After a bad game, his father said:
"Forget it."
The protagonist hated this advice.
"How?"
"What do you mean how?"
"How do you just forget it?"
"You play tomorrow."
"That doesn't erase today."
"No, but today doesn't get another turn either."
The protagonist looked at him.
His father had begun becoming inconveniently quotable.
"You should write that down," the protagonist said.
"Write what?"
"Nothing."
His father changed the television channel.

The protagonist did write it down.
TODAY DOESN'T GET ANOTHER TURN.
He did not credit his father.
Again.
Culture.

A week later he had a good game.
Very good.
He became temporarily forgiving toward existence.
Walking home, he replayed everything.
The hit.
The throw.
The pitch he'd recognized.
The way people reacted.
He told himself he was analyzing.
He was admiring.
This is a common clerical error.

Manny met him later.
"Heard you had a game."
"Yeah."
"You hit?"
"Couple."
"Couple what?"
"Hits."
"What, you too humble now?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Three."
"How many times up?"
"Four."
Manny nodded.
"Nice."
The protagonist waited.
That was it.
"One was a double."
Manny smiled.
"Okay."
"Other way."
"Congratulations."
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.
The protagonist had wanted praise and resented having to request it.
This, too, would remain familiar.

He began noticing that he performed humility differently depending on whether praise seemed likely.
If someone already knew he'd done well, he minimized.
If they didn't, information became necessary.
"I'm not saying I played great, but—"
He had played great.
"I got lucky."

He had been practicing every day.
"It was nothing."
It was absolutely not nothing to him.
False humility was a peculiar thing.
It sounded socially polite while secretly demanding contradiction.
"No, you were amazing."
This was the desired response.
He did not yet consider this manipulation.
He considered it manners.

At school, another argument.
This one about race.
The room tightened faster.
Race did that.
Everyone arrived carrying things nobody could see.
Family stories.
Neighborhood stories.
Humiliations.
Fears.
Statistics.
Television.
Parents.
Friends.
People they hated.
People they loved.
One sentence could accidentally touch ten years.
The protagonist enjoyed the subject because it mattered.
He also enjoyed it because everybody became easier to provoke.
He did not sufficiently distinguish these motives.

A white student said:
"I don't see color."
The protagonist laughed.

Not quietly.
The student turned.
"What's funny?"
"You see color."
"No, I mean I don't judge people by it."
"Then say that."
"That's what I meant."
"But that's not what you said."
"So?"
There it was again.
The protagonist continued.
"If you don't see color, you're blind."
Someone laughed.
He felt momentum.
The white student said:
"You know what I mean."
"Yeah. You want credit for not being racist."
The room changed.
Too far perhaps.
The student flushed.
"Fuck you."
The teacher intervened.
The protagonist leaned back, satisfied.
Then a Black student beside him said:
"You're being an asshole."
He turned.
"What?"
"He was trying to say something decent."
"He said something stupid."
"So correct him. Why you gotta make him feel stupid?"
The protagonist stared.
"Because words matter."
"People matter too."
Silence.

The protagonist felt something inside him reach immediately for rebuttal.
Intent doesn't erase language.
Bad phrasing can reveal bad assumptions.
Comfort protects ignorance.
All potentially valid.
None answered what had just been said.
Why you gotta make him feel stupid?
He looked away.

After class, the white student avoided him.
This pleased him briefly.
Then didn't.
The Black student caught up.
"You always do that."
"Do what?"
"Turn everything into court."
"I'm making a point."
"Yeah, and you need a dead body at the end?"
The protagonist laughed despite himself.
"That's dramatic."
"So are you."
"What's your point?"
"My point is you like catching people."
The teacher had said something similar.
This repetition was becoming suspicious.

The student's name was Jerome.
They were not close.
This made the observation more difficult to dismiss.
The protagonist tried anyway.
"He was saying some bullshit."
"Maybe."
"Maybe?"
"Maybe he was trying to say he treats people the same."

"That's not the same as not seeing race."
"I know."
"Then why are we arguing?"
"We're not."
The protagonist stopped walking.
"What?"
Jerome looked at him.
"You are."
Then left.
The protagonist stood there.
He disliked Jerome immediately.
This was unfair.
He knew it.
Disliking him continued.

The notebook that night:
SOMETIMES BEING RIGHT IS JUST ANOTHER WAY TO BE AN ASSHOLE.
He stared.
Added:
BUT BEING NICE DOESN'T MAKE SOMETHING TRUE.
Then:
SO WHAT THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?
This was perhaps the most honest sentence on the page.
He underlined it.

Ana read the notebook once.
With permission this time.
He gave it to her because he wanted her opinion.
This was a lie.
He wanted admiration with notes.
She read quietly.
This was unbearable.
"Well?"
"I'm reading."

"You've been reading."
"That's generally how it works."
He waited.
She smiled without looking up.
He hated her.

Finally she closed it.
"You're good."
Relief entered first.
He tried to hide it.
"Good how?"
"See?"
"What?"
"You can't just take it."
"Take what?"
"Me saying it's good."
"I asked what you meant."
"Exactly."
He looked annoyed.
She handed the notebook back.
"You're a good writer."
This affected him more than expected.
He looked down.
"Thanks."
Actual thanks.
No joke.
Ana noticed.
She did not rescue him from it.

Then she said:
"But you write like you're prosecuting yourself."
He looked up.
"What does that mean?"
"Everything you do becomes evidence that you're secretly terrible."

He laughed.
"That's not true."
"You wrote 'I'm probably full of shit' like twelve times."
"That's a joke."
"Is it?"
"Yeah."
"Okay."
He stared at her.
"Stop saying okay like that."
"Like what?"
"Like you don't believe me."
"I didn't say I don't believe you."
"That's what you mean."
She smiled.
"See? You do understand subtext."
He wanted to throw the notebook at her.
Not seriously.
Mostly.

She opened it again.
"You write about everybody else too."
"Obviously."
"You make everybody sound ridiculous."
"Everybody is ridiculous."
"You too?"
"Especially me."
"There."
"What?"
"You say 'especially me,' and then you get to say anything about everybody."
He went quiet.
This felt unfair because it was accurate enough to be annoying.
"I make fun of myself."
"I know."

"So?"
"So maybe you think that gives you permission."
"Permission for what?"
"To be mean."
He bristled.
"I'm not mean."
Ana looked at him.
He immediately revised.
"Not usually."
She smiled.
"Better."

He took the notebook.
"People are too sensitive."
"Sometimes."
"Sometimes?"
"Sometimes you're insensitive."
He hated the balance.
It gave him nowhere easy to stand.
"Both can be true?" he said sarcastically.
Ana smiled.
"See? You're learning."
"Fuck you."
She kissed him.
This, once again, prevented resolution.

He thought about meanness.
He preferred honesty.
Honesty sounded virtuous.
Meanness sounded defective.
Could the same sentence be both?
Obviously.
Did intent matter?
Yes.
Did effect matter?

Also yes.
Which mattered more?
Depends.
He disliked depends.
He had begun building a philosophy almost entirely out of words he once hated.
Maybe.
Depends.
Sometimes.
Both.
It was humiliating.

He still liked certainty.
Certainty felt like a clean room.
Everything labeled.
Everything in its place.
Good people.
Bad people.
Cowards.
Hypocrites.
Racists.
Victims.
Assholes.
Heroes.
Sellouts.
Real people.
Fake people.
He could classify a room in minutes.
Then somebody he liked would do something ugly.
Somebody he disliked would do something generous.
A coward would become brave once.
A brave person would become frightened.
A racist would help someone he supposedly despised.
A supposedly enlightened person would humiliate a waiter.
Evidence kept contaminating the categories.

He blamed the evidence.

One summer afternoon he watched an argument outside a store.
A man had accused another man of cutting the line.
The second man denied it.
Voices rose.
The protagonist and Manny watched from across the street.
The first man was older.
The second younger.
The younger man looked tougher.
The protagonist immediately assumed the older man was right.
Why?
Because the younger man looked like the kind of person who would cut.
This conclusion took less than a second.
The argument continued.
A woman stepped forward.
"He didn't cut. I told him to get in front of me."
Oh.
The protagonist adjusted.
Then the older man said:
"Well, how the fuck am I supposed to know that?"
Reasonable.
Then he added a racial slur.
There.
Category restored.
Asshole.
Easy.
The protagonist felt relieved.
Manny looked at him.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"What?"

"You looked happy."
"Happy about what?"
"When he said that."
"I wasn't happy."
"Your face."
"My face doesn't—"
Manny started laughing before he finished.
"Fuck you."

But Manny was right.
The slur had simplified the scene.
Before it, everyone had partial information.
After it, the protagonist knew whom to dislike.
Certainty had returned.
He did not like noticing how pleasant that felt.

He wrote later:
SOMETIMES I WANT SOMEBODY TO BE WORSE SO I CAN BE MORE RIGHT ABOUT THEM.
He stopped.
That sentence had teeth.
He did not cross it out.

He was seventeen soon.
The number already had mythology attached.
Seventeen sounded older than sixteen in a way eighteen would later make ridiculous.
Seventeen meant nearing adulthood without any of adulthood's recognized privileges.
You could think about sex constantly and still need permission to stay out late.
You could argue constitutional rights in class and then be told to take out the garbage.
You could read about war and revolution and be grounded for missing curfew.

The contradiction offended him.
He considered himself intellectually capable of running portions of the country.
His mother remained unconvinced he could reliably bring home milk.
Both positions had evidence.

His reading intensified.
He started writing pages at a time.
Not school essays.
Not diaries.
Arguments.
Fragments.
Observations.
Questions that turned into answers and answers that turned into accusations.
He wrote late.
Sometimes too late.
He liked the quiet.
The house altered after everyone slept.
No audience.
No immediate defense required.
The page waited.
He could be cruel there.
He could also reverse himself without humiliation.
Paper did not remember his previous tone unless he left it visible.
This felt like freedom.

One night he wrote about fairness.
He began certain.
LIFE ISN'T FAIR. PEOPLE SHOULD STOP EXPECTING IT TO BE.
Good.
Hard.

Clean.
Then he thought about someone being cheated.
BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU STOP TRYING TO MAKE THINGS FAIR.
Fine.
Then:
MAYBE ACCEPTING THAT LIFE ISN'T FAIR IS DIFFERENT FROM ACCEPTING UNFAIRNESS.
He stared.
This was becoming annoying.
He wanted one sentence.
The world kept requiring two.

He wrote:
TWO THINGS CAN BE TRUE AT ONCE AND BOTH CAN STILL PISS YOU OFF.
Better.
Then he laughed.
He could imagine Manny reading it.
He added:
THIS IS PROBABLY WHY EVERYBODY PREFERS ONE THING.
He sat back.
The sentence pleased him.
Then Ana's voice entered his head.
You enjoy this too much.
Jerome.
You like catching people.
The teacher.
Questions you think you already know the answer to.
He looked at the page.
For once, the prosecution had witnesses.
He wrote slowly:
MAYBE I LIKE CONTRADICTIONS BECAUSE FINDING THEM MAKES ME FEEL SMART.

He stopped.
Then:
THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY AREN'T REAL.
Of course.
The defense had arrived.
Then:
IT ALSO DOESN'T MEAN I SEE MINE.
He stared at this longest.
He did not cross it out.
He did not circle it either.
He closed the notebook.

The next afternoon, he and Manny were on the stoop.
A boy nearby was loudly explaining something about politics.
The protagonist listened.
The boy got a fact wrong.
An easy fact.
The protagonist knew the correction.
He could feel it forming.
Almost physical.
The opening.
The sentence.
The pleasure.
He inhaled.
Then said nothing.
Manny looked at him.
The protagonist looked back.
"What?"
"You okay?"
"Yeah."
"You heard that?"
"Yeah."
"And?"
"And what?"
"He's wrong."

"I know."
Manny waited.
The protagonist shrugged.
"Doesn't matter."
Manny stared at him as if witnessing a medical emergency.
"You want me to get your mother?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Fuck you."
The boy nearby continued talking.
Still wrong.
The protagonist could feel the wrongness sitting there.
Uncorrected.
Alive.
The universe remained intact.
This was unbearable.
It was also interesting.
He lasted perhaps forty seconds.
Then turned.
"Actually—"
Manny bent forward laughing before the correction even began.
The protagonist laughed too.
Progress, again, is humiliating up close.
He corrected the fact anyway.
He was not ready.
Not yet.
But now, at least, he knew there was something to be ready for.

Chapter 8

“What We Inherit”

He turned seventeen without becoming seventeen.
This disappointed him.
The day arrived.
People said happy birthday.
Cake appeared.
Money appeared in folded bills from relatives who had spent years telling him money did not matter.
Nothing inside him changed.
No bell.
No adult voice.
No sudden capacity for judgment.
He woke with the same face.
The same arguments.
The same body, mostly.
The same unfinished thoughts.
Seventeen had sounded more impressive from sixteen.
Most ages do.

His mother gave him a shirt.
His father gave him money.
His brother gave him nothing and later said:
"I didn't get you shit."
This was not entirely true.
He had given him a record two days earlier and apparently wanted to preserve the emotional bookkeeping.
The protagonist understood.

Open affection between brothers required camouflage.
"Good," he said.
"I didn't want anything."
"Then give me the record back."
"Fuck you."
There.
Love restored to acceptable masculine temperature.

The family ate together.
Relatives called.
People who had known him since infancy described him as grown.
He hated this.
Adults regularly called a boy grown moments before telling him to sit down, lower his voice, finish school, come home on time and stop acting like he knew everything.
Grown was ceremonial.
Authority remained elsewhere.
He noticed.
Of course he noticed.
He was becoming very good at noticing systems that irritated him.

His uncle asked:
"So what are you gonna do with yourself?"
The protagonist knew what he meant.
College.
Career.
Future.
The whole administrative mythology.
"Law."
His uncle nodded approvingly.
"Good. Lawyer."
Another relative said:
"He should write."

The protagonist felt heat rise in his face.
He hated that.
"Write what?"
"Whatever you write all the time."
His mother had apparently discussed the notebooks.
This was betrayal at domestic scale.
"I just write shit."
His uncle laughed.
"Then write good shit."
Everyone laughed.
The protagonist smiled.
The joke saved him.
It also irritated him.
He did not want the family discussing writing as though it were a thing he wanted.
Wanting exposed hierarchy.
Lawyer sounded serious.
Writer sounded like something you admitted after success.

Later, his mother said:
"Why'd you get embarrassed?"
"I didn't."
"You did."
"No, I didn't."
She shrugged.
He hated when she won by refusing overtime.

He had begun thinking more about fathers.
Not fatherhood.
Fathers.
The men around him.
What they said.
What they didn't.
Who sat where.
Who drank.

Who hit.
Who didn't.
Who disappeared.
Who worked two jobs.
Who complained about women.
Who depended entirely on women.
Who called softness weakness.
Who cried at funerals with their faces turned away.
Who kissed sons only when arriving from somewhere.
Who touched the back of a boy's neck instead of saying I love you.
He noticed patterns.
This was dangerous.
He began to think he understood men.
He was seventeen.
This should be forgiven only once.

His father believed in toughness.
Not cruelty.
The protagonist would later confuse these.
His father believed a man should withstand things.
Pain.
Embarrassment.
Fatigue.
Failure.
Loss.
He also believed a man should provide.
Protect.
Work.
Not complain too much.
Know what to do.
This final expectation caused trouble because his father did not always know what to do.
Nobody did.

Men simply received fewer acceptable phrases for admitting it.

One afternoon something in the apartment broke.
Plumbing.
The protagonist no longer remembered exactly what.
His father tried to fix it.
For an hour.
Then two.
The problem worsened.
Water appeared where water had no business appearing.
His mother said:
"Call somebody."
His father said:
"I got it."
He did not.
The protagonist watched.
He recognized the scene immediately.
Not the plumbing.
The posture.
I got it.
He had used the same posture in arguments.
With girls.
At school.
When lost.
When frightened.
When unsure.
There it was.
Inheritance.
Not money.
Method.

Finally his father called someone.
The repairman arrived.
Looked.

Turned something.
Unscrewed something.
Used a tool the father did not own.
The problem stopped.
The whole thing took approximately twelve minutes.
The protagonist avoided looking at his father.
Not out of pity.
Something more complicated.
Respect, embarrassment, fear.
He had just watched a man he considered competent fail publicly in his own home.
He did not know what to do with the feeling.
His father paid the repairman.
After the man left, his father said:
"I could've done that."
The protagonist almost laughed.
Stopped.
His mother did not.
"Then why didn't you?"
His father glared.
She smiled.
No cruelty.
Just fact.
The protagonist loved her for it.
Then felt disloyal for loving it.
Family is excellent at producing emotions that arrive already guilty.

That night he wrote:
SOMETIMES SAYING I GOT IT MEANS I DON'T WANT YOU TO SEE I DON'T GOT IT.
He hated the grammar.
Kept it.

The city had started changing again.

At least people said it was.
People always said New York was changing.
This was one of the city's favorite hobbies.
Older people described previous versions with the confidence of original shareholders.
Better neighborhoods.
Worse neighborhoods.
Safer.
More dangerous.
More real.
Less real.
The protagonist listened.
He had begun noticing that nostalgia often edited rent, violence, humiliation, hunger and boredom with surprising generosity.
He also noticed that people newly arriving somewhere could describe improvement without knowing what had been displaced.
Both annoyed him.
This was becoming a problem.

A storefront closed.
Another opened.
Someone said the block was getting better.
Someone else said it was being ruined.
The protagonist looked at the same sidewalk.
He did not understand how both could be true.
Then remembered.
Both can be true.
He had begun using the phrase enough that it risked becoming furniture.

Manny hated when he said it.
"Both can be true."
"Stop saying that."

"Why?"
"Because it's your new bullshit."
"It's not bullshit."
"You say it whenever you don't want to pick."
"Sometimes both are true."
"Sometimes one is wrong."
"Obviously."
"So pick."
The protagonist laughed.
"You don't like nuance."
Manny looked disgusted.
"You learned that word and became unbearable."
This was fair.

They walked.
Storefronts.
Cars.
People at windows.
Old men sitting outside.
Kids running through hydrant water.
Women carrying groceries.
Music from somewhere above.
The block contained almost everything he knew about the world and almost nothing.
He felt protective of it.
Also trapped by it.
This contradiction embarrassed him because loyalty was supposed to be cleaner.
He wanted to leave.
He wanted outsiders not to judge it.
He wanted to criticize it himself.
He wanted credit for surviving things that, most days, did not feel like survival.
He wanted to say the Bronx was hard.
He wanted to say people exaggerated.

He wanted both.
Of course.

Race had become louder too.
Or he had become old enough to hear the frequencies.
Latino.
Black.
White.
Puerto Rican.
Dominican.
Italian.
Jewish.
Irish.
Whatever category a room required.
People made jokes.
Some affectionate.
Some cruel.
Some indistinguishable until the wrong person said them.
He noticed this rule.
The joke did not belong only to the sentence.
It belonged to the relationship.
This complicated his growing belief that words should mean what they meant.
Words did not cooperate.

At home, ethnicity could become argument without warning.
Food.
Accents.
Music.
Which country did what better.
Who was louder.
Who was cheaper.
Who was more proud.
Who worked harder.
Who betrayed whom in history.

People said ridiculous things about entire populations while passing plates to individuals from those same populations.
The protagonist understood this contradiction before he understood how to name it.
A relative could make some sweeping declaration about Dominicans and then ask his Dominican mother for more rice.
Nobody exploded.
This was confusing.
Not because the statement was harmless.
Because love and prejudice appeared capable of occupying the same kitchen.
He preferred cleaner categories.
The kitchen declined.

He once corrected a relative.
"That's racist."
The relative laughed.
"Racist? I'm Puerto Rican."
The protagonist stared.
This argument was new.
"So?"
"So I'm not white."
"What does that have to do with anything?"
The relative waved him off.
"Here we go."
The protagonist felt the opening.
Definitions.
Power.
Prejudice.
History.
He had read things.
He was ready.
His mother said:
"Eat."

He looked at her.
"I'm talking."
"You're eating."
He continued.
She kicked him lightly under the table.
Not violent.
Procedural.

Later he complained.
"You always stop me when I'm making a point."
"No."
"You do."
"I stop you when you're ruining dinner."
"Same thing."
"No."
She looked at him.
"Not everything has to become a lesson."
He did not like this.
It threatened the entire emerging business model.

He had begun to suspect that people sometimes used ideas to avoid people.
This was difficult because he loved ideas.
Ideas were cleaner.
You could examine them.
People changed tone.
Cried.
Got tired.
Misremembered.
Became defensive.
Had histories you could not read completely.
Ideas stayed where you put them.
People did not.

Ana had become less impressed by his arguments.

This made him work harder.
Bad strategy.
One evening they were walking and he made some observation about relationships.
Broad.
Confident.
Almost certainly based on four people.
She stopped.
"How many relationships have you had?"
He knew where this was going.
"That's not the point."
"How many?"
"Depends what you mean."
"Here we go."
"What?"
"You always turn simple questions into definitions."
"Because definitions matter."
"So does the answer."
He smiled.
"Maybe three."
"Maybe?"
"Two."
She laughed.
"Then why do you talk like you wrote the book?"
"I read."
"That's not the same."
"It gives perspective."
"On other people's relationships."
"Which is still perspective."
She shook her head.
He felt the argument slipping.
He could recover.
He usually recovered.
Then something strange happened.
He decided not to.

"Fine."
Ana looked at him.
"What?"
"Fine. I probably don't know what I'm talking about."
She stared.
He felt exposed.
Then she smiled.
"That was attractive."
He laughed.
"Fuck you."
"No, seriously."
"Don't encourage this."
"I mean it."
He looked away.
He did not know what to do with the idea that uncertainty might make him more appealing than performance.
This contradicted years of field research.

A week later he overcorrected.
At a party someone asked his opinion about something.
He said:
"I don't know."
Then again.
And again.
By the fourth time, he was performing uncertainty.
Human beings are astonishingly efficient.
Give them humility and they will eventually turn it into costume.

Manny noticed.
"Now you don't know anything?"
"I'm trying not to bullshit."
"You look like you're bullshitting about not bullshitting."
The protagonist laughed so hard he nearly spilled his drink.
There was no safe place around Manny.

This was why he trusted him.

The notebooks multiplied.
Not dramatically.
They accumulated.
Different sizes.
Some nearly full.
Some abandoned after ten pages because he decided he hated the paper.
He wrote in margins.
On receipts.
On newspaper edges.
On school papers.
Ideas appeared at inconvenient times.
Most were mediocre.
Some were terrible.
A few stayed.
He had begun rereading older notebooks and discovering a stranger.
The handwriting looked familiar.
The certainty did not.
He found an entry from two years earlier:
PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF THINGS THAT MAKE THEM FEEL SMALL.
He remembered believing it.
Still partly believed it.
Then underneath:
SOMETIMES THINGS ARE JUST STUPID.
He laughed.
Past him had apparently anticipated criticism.
Smart kid.
Annoying kid.
Both.

He found:

IF I SAY THE WORST THING ABOUT ME FIRST, NOBODY CAN USE IT AGAINST ME.
He stopped.
That one felt less funny now.
He remembered Ana saying he prosecuted himself.
He read further.
Page after page.
Idiot.
Full of shit.
Coward.
Fake.
Hypocrite.
Asshole.
Some as jokes.
Some accusations.
Some both.
He began to notice how often he wrote about himself as though he were someone he disliked.
This did not feel like insight.
It felt like evidence.
His first instinct was to punish himself for being so punitive.
This was impressively efficient.

He wrote:
MAYBE BEING HARD ON YOURSELF ISN'T THE SAME AS BEING HONEST WITH YOURSELF.
He stared.
Then:
BUT MAYBE PEOPLE SAY THAT BECAUSE THEY WANT TO LET THEMSELVES OFF EASY.
There.
The old prosecutor objected.
He sat with both sentences.
No verdict.

His father entered without knocking.
The protagonist closed the notebook.
"What?"
"Why you always close that shit when somebody comes in?"
"Because it's mine."
"I'm not reading it."
"I know."
His father stood there.
Then:
"You okay?"
The question irritated him.
"I'm fine."
"You sure?"
"Yeah."
His father nodded.
Did not leave.
The protagonist looked at him.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Then why are you standing there?"
His father shrugged.
"I don't know."
This was unusual.
Adults, especially fathers, were supposed to know.
The protagonist waited.
His father finally sat on the edge of the other bed.
"You think too much."
The protagonist laughed.
"That's not a real problem."
"It can be."
"How?"
His father looked toward the window.
"Everything doesn't need an answer."
This sounded suspiciously like surrender.
"Then how do you understand anything?"

His father smiled.
"Maybe you don't."
The protagonist stared.
This was intolerable.
"What does that mean?"
"I don't know."
His father laughed at his own answer.
The protagonist tried not to.
Failed.

They sat quietly.
This was rare.
Not silence caused by television.
Actual silence.
The protagonist wanted to ask his father questions.
About money.
Marriage.
Fear.
Work.
Regret.
Whether he had wanted another life.
Whether he felt trapped.
Whether becoming a father had frightened him.
Whether he believed the things he said about men because they were true or because somebody had said them to him first.
He asked none.
Instead:
"You ever think you fucked up your life?"
Excellent.
Subtle.
His father looked at him.
"Every day."
The protagonist did not expect this.
His father smiled.

"Not every day."
Then:
"Some days."
"What'd you fuck up?"
His father leaned back.
"A lot of things."
"Like what?"
"None of your business."
There.
Normality restored.
"Then why say it?"
"Because you asked."
"That's not an answer."
His father laughed.
"You know, you can be a real pain in the ass."
"So I've heard."
They sat longer.
Then his father said:
"You think you're supposed to figure everything out before you do anything."
The protagonist frowned.
"No I don't."
"You do."
"How?"
His father shrugged.
"You're always asking what something means."
"So?"
"Sometimes it means you did something stupid."
The protagonist laughed.
His father continued.
"Then you fix it."
Simple.
The protagonist distrusted simplicity.
Simple answers often hid something.
Sometimes what they hid was the fact that they were useful.

"What if you can't fix it?"
"Then don't do it again."
"What if you do?"
"Then you're an asshole."
The protagonist laughed.
His father smiled.
"And then?"
"Try again."
There was nothing elegant about this.
No system.
No theory.
The protagonist liked it against his will.

His father got up.
At the door he said:
"And stop writing that you're an asshole all the time."
The protagonist froze.
"You said you don't read my notebook."
"I don't."
"Then how do you know?"
"You talk."
The door closed.
The protagonist stared after him.
This was deeply unfair.
Apparently the evidence had escaped containment.

He opened the notebook.
For several minutes he wrote nothing.
Then:
IF YOU CALL YOURSELF AN ASSHOLE AND KEEP DOING THE SAME THING, THAT'S NOT HONESTY.
He stopped.
Then:
IT'S JUST BETTER PR.

He laughed.
That one stayed.

At seventeen he had become convinced that self-awareness mattered.
This was correct.
He had not yet discovered that self-awareness without changed behavior can become entertainment.
You notice the flaw.
Name it brilliantly.
Make a joke.
Explain its origin.
Forgive yourself for understanding it.
Repeat.
He was beginning to build an elegant circular road.
Years would pass before he noticed he had been driving around the same block.

His mother's birthday came not long after.
He forgot until that morning.
This was bad.
He loved his mother.
He also forgot.
Both were true.
He panicked.
Asked his brother.
His brother had remembered.
Of course.
"Did you get her something?"
"Yeah."
"What?"
"None of your business."
"I forgot."
"I know."
"How do you know?"

"Because you're you."
The protagonist hated this answer.
"Help me."
His brother smiled.
There was pleasure in leverage.
"How much you got?"
"Not much."
"Get flowers."
"That's corny."
"Then give her nothing."
The protagonist bought flowers.

His mother loved them.
This offended his theory.
"They're just flowers," he said.
She looked at him.
"Then why'd you buy them?"
"I forgot your birthday."
His brother nearly choked.
The protagonist had intended honesty.
His mother stared.
Then laughed.
"You idiot."
"See? He forgot," his brother said.
"Shut up."
His mother kissed the protagonist's cheek.
"Thank you."
He felt worse.
This confused him.
If she had yelled, punishment would have settled the account.
Her kindness left the debt inside him.

Later he wrote:

SOMETIMES FORGIVENESS FEELS WORSE THAN GETTING CAUGHT.
He thought about why.
Did not know.
Left it.

That week, he saw an older man humiliate a cashier.
Not dramatically.
No screaming.
Worse.
The calm kind.
The man had money.
Good coat.
Watch.
Spoke slowly.
The cashier was young.
Something about change.
Or a price.
The protagonist watched the man make the cashier smaller sentence by sentence.
No slur.
No profanity.
Nothing that would look impressive in a story.
Just contempt.
The protagonist hated him immediately.
He imagined saying something.
Did not.
The man left.
The cashier continued working.
The protagonist bought what he came for.
Said thank you too enthusiastically.
The cashier barely noticed.
Outside, he was angry.
At the man.
At himself.

At the cashier for not recognizing his compensatory decency.
This last part embarrassed him.
He had done nothing.
Then wanted moral credit for feeling bad about it.
He wrote nothing that night.
Some evidence was not ready for court.

A few days later, he told Ana the story.
She asked:
"Why didn't you say anything?"
"I don't know."
"You always say something."
"I know."
"Were you scared?"
"No."
Too fast.
Ana waited.
He looked away.
"Maybe."
There it was.
Maybe.
Useful little word.
Not cowardice.
Not courage.
A door left open.
"What were you scared of?"
"I don't know."
"Getting hit?"
"No."
"Then what?"
He became irritated.
"I said I don't know."
She let it go.
He was grateful.
Then resentful that she had let him go.

He wanted absolution without asking.
Humans are ambitious creatures.

He thought about it later.
Maybe he feared looking stupid.
Maybe the older man would turn on him.
Maybe nobody would support him.
Maybe the cashier would be embarrassed further.
Maybe he simply froze.
All explanations.
Possibly excuses.
He could hear his father.
Understanding why doesn't mean you get a pass.
He hated when other people's sentences took up residence.

He wrote:
I LIKE COURAGE MORE IN THEORY.
Then:
EVERYBODY DOES.
He stopped.
There.
Everybody.
His favorite hiding place.
He crossed it out.
Wrote:
I DO.
That felt smaller.
Worse.
More accurate.
He left it.

The year moved.
Baseball.
School.
Girls.

Arguments.
Trains.
Parties.
Family.
Books.
Money.
Music.
The same city and a different one every week.
He began thinking more about leaving for college.
This created guilt.
The neighborhood had made him.
Or damaged him.
Or both.
He did not know whether wanting to leave meant ambition or betrayal.
People around him used both words depending upon mood.
Some praised kids who got out.
Others asked why anybody who became successful suddenly acted too good for the block.
The message was clear:
Leave.
But not too much.
Change.
But remain recognizable.
Succeed.
But do not make anyone else feel abandoned.
Remember where you came from.
But do not become trapped by it.
Simple.

He told Manny:
"I can't stay here forever."
Manny said:
"Who asked you to?"
The protagonist laughed.

"No, I'm serious."
"So am I."
"Don't you ever want to leave?"
"Sure."
"Then you know what I mean."
"No."
"How?"
"Because you make leaving sound like you're escaping prison."
The protagonist looked around.
"I didn't say that."
"You talk like it."
"That's not what I mean."
"So what do you mean?"
He did not know.
He wanted more.
That was true.
More what?
Space.
Books.
People.
Money.
Rooms he had not entered.
Women he had not met.
Versions of himself not yet tested.
He could not say all this.
"I just want to see what else is out there."
Manny nodded.
"That's normal."
The protagonist disliked normal.
It reduced the drama.

"What if I never come back?"
Manny laughed.
"You'll come back."

"How do you know?"
"Your mother's here."
This ended philosophy.

That night the protagonist looked through old notebooks.
Nine.
Eleven.
Thirteen.
Fourteen.
Fifteen.
Sixteen.
Versions.
He found:
NOBODY KNOWS SHIT.
Still good.
Too good perhaps.
Then:
PEOPLE SAY THEY KNOW THINGS WHEN THEY MEAN THEY BELIEVE THEM.
Crossed out.
He stared at the faint words.
He had crossed them out years ago.
Why?
He didn't remember.
He read on.
California.
Money.
Truth.
Girls.
Rules.
Toughness.
Music.
Authority.
Race.
Responsibility.

Contradiction.
Pages filled with the enormous discovery that human beings were inconsistent.
He smiled.
Then became embarrassed.
Then affectionate.
This last feeling was new.
Not pride.
Not forgiveness.
Something softer.
The kid had been trying.
Badly.
Arrogantly.
Sometimes brilliantly.
Mostly without enough information.
But trying.
The protagonist did not know what to call the feeling.
So naturally he ruined it.
"Fucking idiot," he whispered.
Then he laughed.
There.
Safer.

He reached for a pen.
Under an old sentence—
THAT INCLUDES ME
—there was a black line where his nine-year-old hand had crossed it out.
He remembered.
Not perfectly.
Memory had been working on the scene for years.
But enough.
He had written it.
Then rejected it.
At nine.

He stared.
The phrase was barely visible.
He wrote underneath:
STILL DOES.
He almost stopped there.
Then added:
PROBABLY MORE THAN I KNOW.
He read it.
The sentence felt correct.
That worried him.

From the other room, his mother called:
"Come eat."
"I'm coming."
He did not move.
He smiled.
Same lie.
Eight years later.
Maybe not a lie.
Technically.
He looked at the notebook.
All those pages.
All that thinking.
All that improvement.
He was still sitting exactly where he was after saying he was coming.
This struck him as funny.
Then less funny.
Then funny again.
He closed the notebook.
"NOW!"
"I'm coming!"
He stood.
Progress.
Tiny.

Late.
Unimpressive.
Enough to get him to dinner.
For now, that would have to do.

Chapter 9

“The Boy Who Had an Explanation”

At seventeen, he discovered that a notebook could become a weapon without anybody noticing.
Not a dangerous weapon.
Usually.
But it could move people.
It could make him sound older.
It could preserve an argument after the other person had gone home.
It could make confusion look deliberate.
It could take something he had felt badly and return it to him with punctuation.
This was powerful.
He abused it almost immediately.

He had started writing longer pieces.
Not school assignments.
Not quite essays.
Not quite journal entries.
They were arguments with no named opponent.
He wrote about class.
Race.
Parents.
Teachers.
Baseball.
Fear.
Women.

Politics.
People who cared too much what other people thought.
People who pretended not to care.
People who called themselves real.
People who needed everyone else to know they were real.
He had begun to suspect that the word real was frequently used by people in the middle of a performance.
This pleased him.
He wrote it down.

One piece began:
MOST PEOPLE DON'T WANT THE TRUTH. THEY WANT CONFIRMATION WITH BETTER GRAMMAR.
He read it twice.
Very good.
He hated that he liked it.
Then wrote underneath:
INCLUDING ME.
This was becoming a habit.
A useful habit.
Also a trick.
If he indicted himself last, he could say almost anything first.
He did not yet know whether this made him more honest or merely harder to accuse.

He carried notebooks everywhere now.
Not in a romantic way.
He was not wandering through the Bronx waiting for muses.
Mostly he forgot things.
Ideas came while he was on trains.
At practice.
In class.
Standing in line.
Talking to someone he should have been listening to.
He wrote phrases fast.

Half a sentence.
A question.
A name.
Sometimes something brilliant.
More often:
WHY DO PEOPLE SAY "NO OFFENSE" RIGHT BEFORE OFFENSE
or
MEN TALK ABOUT WOMEN LIKE THEY ARE SPECIES
or
CALLING SOMEBODY LAZY IS EASIER THAN ASKING WHAT THEY'RE TIRED FROM
He liked the third one.
Then worried it sounded soft.
This was still a problem.

By then he had also started taking medication for attention.
He did not experience this as a philosophical event.
Adults had names for his inability to sit still inside certain kinds of boredom.
He mostly had descriptions.
Too much energy.
Not enough focus.
Good when interested.
Impossible when not.
Could read for six hours about something nobody assigned and then lose a worksheet placed directly in front of him.
Adults found this inconsistent.
He found it accurate.

The medication changed some things.
Not everything.
He could sit longer.
Hold a line of thought.
Finish pages he might once have abandoned.

He also became aware of his own mind in a new way.
Not better.
Different.
He disliked the idea that a pill could make him more himself.
He disliked equally the possibility that without it he had been less available to himself.
He had no elegant position.
This annoyed him.
So he kept mostly quiet about it.

Manny asked once:
"You feel different?"
"Not really."
This was false.
"Then why take it?"
"Helps me concentrate."
"So you feel different."
"That's not what I mean."
Manny smiled.
Here we go.
The protagonist tried again.
"I don't feel like a different person."
"Just a person who can concentrate."
"Sometimes."
"So different."
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.
The protagonist did too.
There were still places where complexity could be defeated by friendship.

He noticed that people behaved strangely around medication.
Some treated it like cheating.
Others like repair.

Some said kids were overmedicated.
Others said people had suffered for years because nobody understood the problem.
He read about it.
Of course.
Then read more.
He found experts agreeing with each other.
Then experts disagreeing.
This was rude.
He had hoped expertise would reduce uncertainty.
Instead it often produced footnotes.

He wrote:
PEOPLE LIKE SCIENCE MOST WHEN SCIENCE AGREES WITH THEM.
Then:
I LIKE SCIENCE MOST WHEN SCIENCE AGREES WITH ME.
Then:
THIS IS WHY SCIENCE NEEDS PEOPLE WHO DON'T GIVE A SHIT WHAT I LIKE.
He stared.
That one stayed.

The medication also made one thing easier.
Writing.
He could sit in the library and lose time without losing the page.
He liked libraries for reasons he found difficult to explain.
They were quiet without being empty.
People sat near one another without requiring performance.
No one cared how he walked.
What music he liked.
Whether he knew somebody.

Whether his shirt came from a store window or an apartment in Washington Heights.
The room asked one thing.
Read.
This felt clean.
He trusted clean things too much.

He became a voracious reader in the dangerous teenage sense.
He read quickly enough to confuse exposure with mastery.
A book entered him and for three days he spoke from inside it.
He read something about economics and discovered incentives.
Suddenly everyone had incentives.
He read psychology and discovered defense mechanisms.
Suddenly everyone was defending.
He read history and discovered power.
Suddenly nobody was ever just having dinner.
This was exhausting for everyone.
Especially his family.

At breakfast his mother said:
"Pass the butter."
He passed it.
Then said:
"You ever notice women always serve everybody before themselves?"
His mother looked at him.
"I asked for butter."
"I'm serious."
"I know."
"Don't you think that's learned?"
She spread butter on toast.
"Probably."

"From what?"
"From wanting to eat breakfast before you make it into a conference."
His brother laughed.
The protagonist felt misunderstood.
He was, in fact, being annoying.
Both can be true.

He was becoming more interested in politics.
Not party politics exactly.
Too early for that to fully harden.
He liked arguments about power.
Who had it.
Who said they didn't.
Who wanted more.
Who blamed whom.
He distrusted people who talked about "the people" as if several million human beings had signed one statement.
He also used the phrase himself.
This escaped review.

A teacher assigned a paper about poverty.
The protagonist attacked it.
Not the paper.
The subject.
He had opinions.
Too many.
Personal responsibility mattered.
So did opportunity.
Government programs could help.
Government programs could also trap.
Markets created wealth.
Markets also rewarded people who already had leverage.
Families mattered.
So did schools.

Culture mattered.
So did money.
He wrote six pages and hated all six.
The problem was not lack of thought.
The problem was that none of the explanations could remain innocent once another explanation entered the room.
He wanted a cause.
Poverty gave him a crowd.

At dinner he said:
"I think people oversimplify poverty."
His father said:
"People oversimplify everything."
The protagonist looked annoyed.
His father continued eating.
Again.
Simple sentence.
Portable.
Infuriating.
"What do you think causes poverty?"
His father shrugged.
"Different shit."
"Like what?"
"Bad luck. Bad decisions. Bad schools. Bad jobs. Bad parents. No jobs. Drugs. Racism. Being lazy. Being sick. Being stupid. Getting screwed. Screwing yourself."
The protagonist stared.
His father pointed with a fork.
"That's why I said different shit."
The protagonist laughed.
This was much less elegant than the books.
It may have been more accurate.
He did not write it down immediately.
Pride delayed transcription.

The paper earned an A.
The teacher wrote in the margin:
Strong analysis. You resist easy answers.
He loved this.
Resist easy answers.
That sounded like character.
He began repeating it internally.
He resisted easy answers.
This became identity.
Identity became defense.
The next time someone offered a simple answer that happened to be correct, he distrusted it on principle.
Complication had acquired moral prestige.

Ana noticed.
"You make everything complicated."
"Everything is complicated."
"No, everything can be complicated."
"What's the difference?"
"Sometimes you're hungry."
He laughed.
"That's your example?"
"Yes."
"What if you're hungry because—"
"No."
"What?"
"You're doing it."
"Doing what?"
"You're about to explain hunger."
He laughed harder.
She smiled.
"Sometimes eat."
He remembered his father.
Sometimes you did something stupid.
Then you fix it.

The world was becoming crowded with people trying to save him from unnecessary sophistication.
He considered them intellectually suspicious.

He and Ana were becoming closer.
Which meant they were also becoming worse at pretending nothing mattered.
She could hurt him now.
This made him defensive.
He could hurt her.
This made him powerful in ways he did not understand responsibly.
They argued.
Not constantly.
Enough.
Sometimes about real things.
Sometimes about tone.
Tone is what people argue about when the subject has become too dangerous to touch directly.

One night she said:
"You disappear."
He looked at her.
"I'm right here."
"You know what I mean."
He did.
"Sometimes you're talking to me and then you're somewhere else."
"I'm thinking."
"About what?"
"Things."
"See?"
"What?"
"You make everything sound like I'm asking too much."
"I'm answering."

"No, you're giving the minimum answer that lets you say you answered."
He felt attacked.
This was partly because she was attacking him.
Also because she was right.

"What do you want me to say?"
"I don't know. Something true."
He bristled.
"I don't lie to you."
Ana looked at him.
This was not entirely defensible.
"Not about important shit."
"That's not the same as being honest."
He hated this sentence.
"What does that even mean?"
"It means you can tell me where you were and still not tell me anything."
He went quiet.
She had described something he had been practicing for years.
Facts without disclosure.
Accuracy without exposure.
He had thought this was honesty.
Maybe it was.
Maybe not enough of it.

He said:
"I don't know how to talk about everything."
There.
Ugly sentence.
True.
Ana softened.
This irritated him too.

He did not want kindness to appear immediately after admission.
It felt like pity.
"I didn't say I can't talk."
"I know."
"Then don't look at me like that."
"Like what?"
"Like I'm damaged."
"I don't."
"You are."
She shook her head.
"I'm just listening."
This was unbearable.
He preferred argument.
Listening left nowhere to hide.

He changed the subject.
Successfully.
This was not progress.

Sex had become less theoretical.
Not fully adult.
Nothing about them was fully adult.
But desire was now attached to actual people instead of imagination and rumor.
This complicated his views about women substantially.
He still absorbed bullshit from boys.
Who did what.
Who was easy.
Who was respectable.
Who you could date.
Who you could sleep with.
Who counted as girlfriend material.
Human beings had apparently become categories again.
He participated.

He hated parts of himself for participating.
Then participated anyway.
Awareness was not yet strong enough to interrupt belonging.
Often it never is.

One afternoon boys were talking about a girl from school.
The language turned ugly.
He joined enough to remain inside the group.
Not much.
Enough.
Then someone said something that made him laugh.
He laughed.
This mattered.
He did not say the worst thing.
He did not stop it either.
Later, Ana mentioned the same girl.
Said she was nice.
The protagonist felt shame arrive without announcement.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Why'd you make that face?"
"I didn't."
"You did."
His face remained a traitor.

He thought about telling Ana.
He didn't.
He told himself there was nothing to tell.
He had not said much.
He had only laughed.
This was true.
Very clean truth.
That was becoming suspicious.

That night:

SOMETIMES YOU JOIN SOMETHING BY NOT LEAVING IT.
He stared.
Then:
SOMETIMES LAUGHING IS VOTING.
He liked that.
Too much.
Then hated himself for liking a sentence about something he had done badly.
The prosecutor entered.
Coward.
Hypocrite.
Asshole.
He stopped.
Something from the old notebook returned.
Being hard on yourself isn't the same as being honest.
He wrote:
I LAUGHED BECAUSE I WANTED TO BELONG.
Then:
THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT OKAY.
Then:
IT ALSO DOESN'T MAKE ME A MONSTER.
He stared longest at the third sentence.
That one felt dangerous.
Too forgiving.
He almost crossed it out.
Did not.

His writing was changing.
Less proclamation.
More interrogation.
Not because he had become humble.
He still loved proclamation.
But experience kept making proclamations expensive.
Every rule acquired an exception with a face.

Every theory eventually sat beside someone he loved.
Ideas became harder to maintain once they had to survive people.

He began showing some writing to others.
Carefully.
Not family first.
Strangers were safer.
Teachers.
A girl in class.
A boy who wrote poetry.
Ana.
People who could say something was bad without possessing decades of embarrassing childhood evidence.
One teacher said:
"You have a voice."
The protagonist nodded as if he understood.
He did not.
Everyone had a voice.
He assumed she meant his was good.
He preferred that interpretation.

"What does that mean?" he asked later.
The teacher said:
"It sounds like you."
This was alarming.
He had spent years trying to sound like different people depending upon room.
Now apparently the page had identified him.
"What do I sound like?"
She smiled.
"Restless."
He did not like this.
"Restless how?"
"Like you don't trust the first answer."

He liked this better.
"And like you don't trust yourself when you find the second."
He liked this less.

She handed back the paper.
Then said:
"Don't become too impressed with your skepticism."
The protagonist smiled.
"I'm skeptical of my skepticism."
The teacher sighed.
"You see?"
He laughed.
She did not.

Baseball remained one of the few places where thought sometimes had to stop.
A pitch came.
There was no essay.
No committee.
No dialectic.
See it.
Decide.
Move.
He loved this.
He also ruined it whenever possible.
After bad at-bats he analyzed mechanics.
Timing.
Approach.
Pitch selection.
Head movement.
Stride.
Hands.
Confidence.
Fear.
Weather if necessary.

Sometimes the actual cause was simple.
He missed.
He hated this explanation.
It provided no improvement plan.

A coach told him:
"You're thinking too much."
"About what?"
The coach stared.
"That's exactly what I mean."
The team laughed.
The protagonist did not.
Then did.

He began writing about baseball differently.
Not statistics.
Not only.
What happened in the seconds before action.
How fear changed timing.
How confidence could become laziness.
How one bad play traveled into the next if you carried it.
He wrote:
THE GAME HAPPENS BEFORE THE BALL GETS TO YOU.
He liked this.
Then:
BUT IF YOU LIVE TOO MUCH BEFORE IT GETS TO YOU, IT GOES PAST YOU.
Less elegant.
More useful.

He did not know that some of these thoughts would follow him for decades.
At seventeen, the future was not sitting in the room taking notes.

He was just trying to understand why he could feel prepared and still fail.
Why someone less talented could play better.
Why fear could make a routine play feel like surgery.
Why practice did not guarantee calm.
Why knowing what to do did not mean doing it.
This question was larger than baseball.
He did not know that yet.
Good.

The first time someone called him a philosopher, he laughed.
They meant it as a joke.
He accepted it as partial recognition.
Street philosopher sounded even better.
He would not use the phrase himself.
Not yet.
But he stored it.
He stored everything.

Manny called him something else.
"Professor Bullshit."
This was more accurate.

They were sitting on the stoop.
The protagonist had been explaining some theory about why people date people who are bad for them.
Manny listened for several minutes.
Then:
"You ever notice you got explanations for everything?"
"I don't."
"You do."
"I'm thinking out loud."
"Same thing."
"No, it isn't."
Manny smiled.

"Why do people stay with somebody bad for them?"
The protagonist started.
"Could be—"
"No. You."
"What?"
"You ever do it?"
"That's not the point."
Manny laughed.
Professor Bullshit had been called to office hours.

The protagonist tried again.
"People are complicated."
"Yeah."
"History matters."
"Sure."
"Self-esteem."
"Okay."
"Fear of being alone."
"Maybe."
"Habits."
"Fine."
Manny waited.
"What?"
"You don't know."
The protagonist looked at him.
"I just gave you five reasons."
"Exactly."
"So?"
"You got five reasons because you don't know."
This irritated him enormously.
Then something loosened.
He laughed.
Manny laughed too.

Maybe explanations multiplied around uncertainty.

Maybe sophistication sometimes arrived precisely because a simple confession felt unbearable.
I don't know.
I was scared.
I wanted her to like me.
I wanted him to think I was smart.
I was jealous.
I wanted money.
I wanted control.
I wanted to win.
I wanted to belong.
These sentences had no footnotes.
He distrusted them.
They were also difficult to defeat.

That night he wrote:
MY BEST EXPLANATIONS MIGHT JUST BE BETTER DRESSED EXCUSES.
He stopped.
That sentence frightened him a little.
Not because it was necessarily true.
Because he could immediately think of examples.
Ana.
Arguments.
The boys talking about the girl.
His changing stories.
His opinions about class.
His insistence on nuance when choosing felt dangerous.
His insistence on certainty when nuance threatened his side.
Evidence was beginning to turn around.

He wrote:
SOMETIMES I DON'T NEED A THEORY.
Then:
SOMETIMES I WAS JUST JEALOUS.

Long pause.
Then:
OR SCARED.
Then:
OR I WANTED TO LOOK SMART.
Then:
OR I WANTED SOMEBODY TO LIKE ME.
He stopped.
The page felt indecent.
No cleverness.
No protection.
He almost tore it out.

Instead he turned the page.
This was not courage.
But it was not deletion either.
We will allow him that.

The next day, he got into an argument at school.
Politics.
He won.
At least by the standards he had previously used.
The other boy stopped talking.
People laughed at one of the protagonist's lines.
The teacher moved on.
Victory.
The familiar electricity came.
Then something new accompanied it.
He looked at the other boy.
Embarrassed.
Angry.
Quiet.
The protagonist heard Jerome:
You need a dead body at the end?
He heard Ana:

You make everything sound bigger.
He heard his teacher:
Don't become too impressed with your skepticism.
He heard Manny:
You got explanations for everything.
Too many people lived in his head now.
This was inconvenient.

After class he caught the boy.
"Hey."
The boy turned.
"What?"
The protagonist almost said:
I didn't mean to make you look stupid.
This felt humiliating.
He chose a worse version.
"I wasn't trying to be an asshole."
The boy stared.
"You were."
Fair.
"Yeah."
The protagonist nodded.
"Probably."
"Definitely."
The boy walked away.
No reconciliation.
No lesson.
No grateful handshake.
The protagonist stood there feeling foolish.
Good.
Some repairs should not reward the repairman immediately.

He wrote later:
APOLOGIZING DOESN'T MEAN SOMEBODY HAS TO MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER.

Then:
THAT'S PROBABLY WHY PEOPLE HATE APOLOGIZING.
He smiled.
Professor Bullshit remained employed.

By seventeen, he had begun to understand something he would spend years forgetting:
The mind could explain almost anything after the fact.
Cowardice could become caution.
Control could become standards.
Jealousy could become discernment.
Cruelty could become honesty.
Neediness could become loyalty.
Arrogance could become confidence.
Avoidance could become patience.
Failure could become unfairness.
Sometimes those descriptions were accurate.
Sometimes they were disguises.
The problem was that the disguises came from the same closet as the truth.

Late one night, he sat at the kitchen table.
Everyone asleep.
Notebook open.
The refrigerator humming.
A car passed outside.
Someone shouted somewhere below.
The city continuing its night shift.
He wrote:
THE HARDEST PERSON TO CATCH LYING IS YOURSELF BECAUSE YOU ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU'LL BELIEVE.
He read it.
Then changed lying to bullshitting.
Better.

He read it again.
Too good.
He smiled anyway.
Then underneath:
AND EVEN WRITING THIS MAKES ME FEEL LIKE I'M BETTER AT CATCHING IT THAN I PROBABLY AM.
He stopped.
There was nowhere obvious to go after that.
No punchline.
No clean conclusion.
Just the page.
He looked at his handwriting.
For once he did not cross anything out.
He turned off the kitchen light and went to bed.
The notebook remained on the table.
Open.
Not because he had suddenly become fearless.
He forgot it.
In the morning his mother would probably read it.
Some philosophies begin with revelation.
His continued to develop through poor household security.

Chapter 10

“The Cost of Knowing Better”

His mother read the notebook.
Not all of it.
Probably.
He would never know.
This is one of the disadvantages of leaving private philosophy open on a kitchen table in a household containing a mother.
He came downstairs the next morning and saw it exactly where he had left it.
Open.
He stopped.
His mother was at the stove.
He looked at the notebook.
Then at her.
Then at the notebook again.
She did not turn around.
"Why are you looking like that?"
"You read it."
"Read what?"
"My notebook."
"What notebook?"
He hated this.
"You know what notebook."
She turned.
"Oh, that."
There.
Evidence.

"You read it."
"A little."
He felt violated.
Then immediately curious about which part.
"What did you read?"
"You don't want me reading it."
"No."
"Then why you asking?"
This was a legitimate procedural objection.
He ignored it.
"How much?"
"Enough."
"Enough for what?"
"Breakfast."
She put eggs on a plate.
He stared.
"What does that mean?"
"It means eat."
"No, what'd you read?"
His mother looked at him.
"You write too much."
He almost laughed.
"That's your criticism?"
"It's not criticism."
"What is it?"
"An observation."
He hated when other people used his vocabulary.

She slid the plate toward him.
He sat.
Waited.
She waited better.
He broke first.
"You weren't supposed to read it."
"I know."

"Then why did you?"
"It was open."
"That doesn't mean—"
"I know."
There was no defense.
This should have satisfied him.
It did not.
He wanted motive.
People are rarely content with confession when explanation is still available.
"Why?"
She sat across from him.
"Because I'm your mother."
"That's not a reason."
"It is to mothers."
He rolled his eyes.
She smiled.
Then:
"You think you're bad."
He stopped.
"What?"
"You write like you think you're bad."
"I don't."
"You do."
"It's jokes."
"Some."
He looked away.
This was the problem with mothers.
They had access to early drafts.

"You call yourself stupid."
"Everybody does."
"You call yourself an asshole."
"Sometimes I am."
"Everybody is."

He looked back.
She shrugged.
"Why you need to keep reminding yourself?"
He did not have an answer.
Not a usable one.
Because if I accuse myself first, nobody else can surprise me.
Because cruelty feels more serious than kindness.
Because I distrust self-forgiveness.
Because I think shame can keep me from becoming the person I am ashamed of.
Because if I call myself a fraud, then being discovered as one becomes less dangerous.
None arrived as sentences.
Only discomfort.
So he chose irritation.
"You read something private and now you're analyzing me?"
His mother nodded slowly.
"There he is."
"What does that mean?"
"Nothing."
"You always say nothing when you mean something."
She smiled.
He had learned from the correct person after all.

He ate.
The eggs were good.
This made anger less satisfying.
Before leaving, his mother touched his shoulder.
"You don't have to hate yourself to improve yourself."
He nearly objected.
She walked away before he could.
Excellent technique.
He stood in the kitchen with his bag over one shoulder and an entire rebuttal deprived of audience.
He wrote the sentence down on the train.

Not because he agreed.
Because it bothered him.
Those were often the sentences worth keeping.

School had become more consequential.
College applications had entered conversation.
Guidance counselors began speaking in percentages.
Grades.
Tests.
Activities.
Schools.
Deadlines.
Possibility converted into paperwork.
He disliked paperwork because paperwork did not care about potential.
It wanted evidence.
This was offensive.

He believed he was smarter than several students with better grades.
Sometimes he was.
They still had better grades.
This created an existential problem.
If intelligence mattered, why were they ahead?
If discipline mattered, was discipline part of intelligence?
If organization mattered, did losing assignments count as a character flaw or merely a logistical one?
He preferred logistical.
Character flaws had moral implications.

A guidance counselor looked over his transcript.
"You're inconsistent."
He nodded.
This sounded more interesting than mediocre.

"Your teachers say the same thing. Very strong when engaged."
He liked that.
"But your grades don't always reflect your ability."
He liked that even more.
There it was.
Ability.
The invisible asset.
Potential's respectable cousin.
"What schools are you thinking about?"
He named several.
The counselor looked at the transcript again.
"Those are reaches."
He felt insulted.
"Why?"
She looked at him.
He knew why.
He wanted her to explain anyway.
"Your grades."
"I test well."
"That helps."
"My writing's good."
"That helps."
"I play baseball."
"That may help."
"Then why are they reaches?"
She paused.
"Because the other applicants will also have things that help."
This was outrageous.
Other people had apparently been developing while he was busy thinking about himself.

He left angry.
Not at her.

At the system.
The system was always available.
He began constructing the case before reaching the stairs.
Schools reward conformity.
Grades measure compliance.
Standardized tests measure narrow skills.
Admissions favor people who know how to play the game.
Some families understand the process better.
Money buys preparation.
Teachers reward students who fit expectations.
All partly true.
By the second floor he had built an impressive explanation for why his own choices occupied a smaller percentage of the outcome than they had twenty minutes earlier.
The machinery was beautiful.
He almost admired it while operating.
Then his mother's sentence arrived:
You don't have to hate yourself to improve yourself.
Annoying woman.

He sat on the front steps of the school.
Opened his notebook.
Wrote:
THE SYSTEM CAN BE UNFAIR AND I CAN STILL HAVE FUCKED UP.
He stared.
Then:
BOTH BEING TRUE DOES NOT CANCEL EITHER ONE.
He circled that.
Then uncircled it because circling had begun to feel theatrical.

Baseball gave him a similar lesson more efficiently.
There was a game he should have played better.
That sentence mattered.

Not could have.
Should have.
He had practiced.
Prepared.
He knew the pitcher.
He knew what was coming in certain counts.
Before the game he felt ready.
Then he made an error early.
Routine ball.
Nothing dramatic.
A ball he had fielded hundreds of times.
It hit his glove wrong.
Or he moved wrong.
Or the hop changed.
Depends who was telling it.
The runner reached.
No catastrophe.
Except internally.

He replayed the error while standing at his position.
Again.
Again.
His feet.
Hands.
Angle.
What he should have done.
A pitch happened.
Then another.
The game continued rudely.
He was still at the error.
A second ball came to him.
More difficult this time.
He rushed.
Bad throw.
Runner safe.

Now there were two.
He could feel the first mistake growing teeth.

From the dugout the coach yelled:
"Next one!"
He hated coaching phrases that sounded obvious.
Of course next one.
There was no previous one available.
Still, the phrase existed because human beings regularly needed instructions for obvious things.
He did not reset.
He tried to reset.
Different.

At the plate he thought about fielding.
Then realized he was thinking about fielding.
Then told himself to stop thinking about fielding.
This required thinking about fielding.
The pitcher threw.
Strike one.
He stepped out.
Breathed.
Told himself to be present.
He had begun using that word.
Present.
Good word.
Difficult place.
He got back in.
Strike two.
Now the at-bat had become evidence of the inning.
He swung at a pitch he would normally take.
Missed.
Three pitches.
Done.

Walking back to the dugout, he felt the familiar prosecution warming up.
You fucking idiot.
Good start.
What the fuck are you doing?
Strong.
You know better.
There.
The worst one.
You know better.
Knowing had become another instrument of punishment.
He sat down.
The coach passed.
"Flush it."
The protagonist looked up.
"What?"
"Whole inning. Gone."
"It's not gone."
The coach stopped.
"No shit."
The protagonist waited.
The coach pointed toward the field.
"But you are."
Then walked away.
He stared.
This irritated him because it made sense before he was ready to admit it.

He got another chance later.
A ground ball.
Routine.
His body tightened.
The previous errors arrived immediately.
He heard them.
Felt them.

Then something simpler arrived.
Ball.
He watched it.
Moved.
Fielded.
Threw.
Out.
Nothing happened.
No revelation.
Nobody applauded.
The first two errors remained in the scorebook.
The third ball did not redeem them.
It was simply the third ball.
This felt important.
He did not know why yet.

He got a hit later.
A line drive.
Clean.
Again, no redemption.
The game did not rearrange itself into a moral narrative.
He had played badly and then better.
Both.
He hated how often life required that answer.

Afterward his father asked:
"How'd you do?"
The protagonist considered the options.
"Bad."
"How bad?"
"Two errors."
"You hit?"
"One for three."
"So bad."
"Yeah."

His father nodded.
No rescue.
No "that's not so bad."
No explanation.
The protagonist waited.
His father said:
"You know what you did wrong?"
"Yeah."
"Can you fix it?"
"Probably."
"Then fix it."
Simple again.
He almost said:
It's more complicated than that.
He stopped.
Maybe it wasn't.

Manny heard about the game.
Naturally.
Information traveled.
"You booted two?"
"Yeah."
"Professor Bullshit got hands?"
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.
Then mimed a ground ball rolling through his legs.
It had not rolled through his legs.
This made the joke historically inaccurate.
The protagonist objected.
"That's not what happened."
"You made two errors."
"One was a throw."
Manny laughed harder.
The protagonist did too.
This was useful.

Humiliation became smaller when shared with someone who had no interest in preserving its grandeur.

Ana was less gentle.
Not cruel.
Worse.
Accurate.
"You get weird after you mess up."
They were walking.
"I don't."
"You do."
"How?"
"You disappear."
Again.
He hated that word.
"I think."
"That's what you call it."
"What do you call it?"
"Punishing yourself."
He laughed.
"That's dramatic."
"You get quiet, then mad, then if anybody says anything you act like they don't understand."
"Sometimes they don't."
"Sometimes they do."
He stopped walking.
"So what am I supposed to do, just not care?"
Ana looked at him.
There it was.
The false binary.
He had begun catching these in other people.
Less often in himself.
"I didn't say that."
"If I fuck up, I'm supposed to be happy?"
"I didn't say that either."

"Then what are you saying?"
She sighed.
"I'm saying maybe feeling like shit isn't the same thing as caring."
He went quiet.
That sentence had arrived without permission.

"What does that mean?"
"It means maybe you think if you beat yourself up enough, it proves the mistake mattered."
He looked away.
The sidewalk became interesting.
A man was unloading boxes.
Traffic moved.
Someone called from across the street.
He watched everything except her.
She continued.
"But then you're still making it about you."
He looked back.
"How?"
"Because now everybody has to deal with you being miserable."
He felt anger.
Immediate.
Hot.
This was unfair.
He had made the mistakes.
He had every right to—
Right to what?
He did not finish the thought.

"I don't ask anybody to deal with me."
"You don't have to ask."
He laughed without humor.
"So now being quiet is selfish?"

"Sometimes."
This was intolerable.
Every defense had developed an exception.

They argued.
Actually argued.
Not clever.
Not elegant.
He accused her of psychoanalyzing him.
She accused him of turning criticism into a trial.
He said she thought she understood him better than she did.
She said maybe.
He said she always used maybe when she wanted to sound reasonable.
She told him he used "it's complicated" when he wanted to avoid admitting someone else had a point.
He told her that was bullshit.
She said okay.
He nearly lost his mind.

Then he said something mean.
Not monstrous.
Not cinematic.
A sentence designed to land exactly where he knew it would.
He knew enough about her now.
That was the problem.
Intimacy gives a person coordinates.
You can use them to find someone.
Or hit them.
He hit.

She went quiet.
Immediately he knew.
Not from theory.
Her face.

The argument disappeared.
All his excellent points became irrelevant in one second.
He wanted the sentence back.
Language did not offer refunds.

"I didn't mean it like that."
First defense.
She looked at him.
He knew better.
He had meant it precisely like that for approximately three seconds.
Long enough.
"I was pissed."
Second defense.
She nodded.
"Yeah."
"I shouldn't have said it."
Better.
She said nothing.
"I'm sorry."
Still nothing.
He felt panic.
Not because apology was insincere.
Because he wanted the apology to work.
Immediately.
He wanted moral cause and effect.
Wrong sentence.
Correct apology.
Relationship restored.
Human beings refused.

"Say something."
She looked at him.
"What do you want me to say?"
"I don't know."

"You hurt my feelings."
He felt shame.
Simple sentence.
No escape.
"I know."
"No, you didn't. Not until you saw my face."
He started to object.
Stopped.
She was right.
Or right enough.
He had known intellectually the sentence could hurt her.
He had not known it emotionally until it worked.
This distinction disgusted him.

"I'm sorry."
"I know."
"That's it?"
She stared.
He heard himself.
Apologizing doesn't mean somebody has to make you feel better.
There it was.
His own writing had become hostile witness.

Ana left.
Not forever.
That would have been easier to narrate.
She went home.
He walked alone.
The city continued refusing to care that he had damaged something important.
Stores remained open.
People laughed.
A bus passed.
Two men argued over parking.

Someone was buying fruit.
His choices mattered enormously.
He did not.
He did not yet possess those words.
Only the sensation.
The world had not changed.
His world had.
The distinction was brutal.

He went home and did not write.
This was unusual.
He sat.
Replayed the argument.
At first accurately.
Then with improvements.
She had provoked him.
She had been dismissive.
She knew exactly how to push him.
She had said unfair things too.
All true enough.
The memory began redistributing responsibility.
He noticed.
That was new.
He could feel himself editing.
Not lying.
Editing.
A cut here.
Emphasis there.
One of her sentences moved earlier.
His mean sentence became more reactive.
More understandable.
Less deliberate.
He watched the renovation happen.
It frightened him.

He opened the notebook.
Wrote:
I SAID IT BECAUSE I KNEW IT WOULD HURT HER.
Nothing else.
He wanted context.
Added:
I WAS ANGRY.
Stared.
Then:
THAT EXPLAINS WHY I WANTED TO HURT HER.
Then:
IT DOESN'T CHANGE THAT I WANTED TO.
He stopped.
No sophisticated excuse available.
He could have built one.
He had the materials.
Childhood.
Masculinity.
Defensiveness.
Fear.
Attachment.
Shame.
Learned behavior.
All relevant.
All real.
None changed the sentence.
For once he left the architecture unbuilt.

The next day Ana did not call.
He thought about calling.
Didn't.
Pride became patience when properly renamed.
By evening he called.
Her mother answered.
He asked for Ana.

Waited.
Every second became a referendum on whether she would come to the phone.
She did.
"Hi."
"Hey."
Silence.
He had prepared several versions.
None survived contact.
"I'm sorry."
"You said that."
"I know."
Another silence.
"I don't know what else to say."
This was perhaps the first useful thing.
Ana said:
"Then don't say anything else."
He almost filled the silence.
Stopped.
They stayed there.
Two teenagers connected by a telephone line, each listening to the other's breathing because neither had yet learned that silence could occasionally do work.

Finally she said:
"You can't do that every time you're mad."
"I know."
"No, you know now."
He swallowed.
"Yeah."
"And knowing isn't enough."
There.
The sentence.
The whole problem in five words.
Knowing isn't enough.

He wanted to resist because it sounded obvious.
He had begun learning that obvious truths were frequently the ones intelligence worked hardest to avoid.
"I know."
Ana laughed once.
Not kindly.
"You just did it again."
He laughed too.
Small.
Embarrassed.
"Yeah."

They did not solve everything.
They talked.
Some.
Then stopped.
Then talked again two days later.
She did not immediately trust the apology.
This offended the part of him that considered sincere remorse a form of payment.
He began discovering that remorse was not payment.
It was information.
What came next mattered more.
This was disappointing.
Feeling bad was much easier than behaving differently.

At school he became more aware of this.
A teacher returned an assignment late.
Apologized.
Then returned the next one late too.
The protagonist noticed.
A friend promised to stop borrowing money and forgetting.
Forgot.
A relative apologized for saying cruel things when drinking.
Then drank again.

Everywhere he looked, people knew better.
This should have made him compassionate.
Sometimes it did.
Other times he judged them more harshly.
Awareness created expectation.
He had not yet decided whether this was fair.

He began writing about character.
A dangerous subject at seventeen.
He wrote:
CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU DO AFTER YOU ALREADY KNOW THE EXCUSE.
He liked this.
Too neat.
He revised:
CHARACTER MIGHT BE WHAT YOU DO AFTER THE EXCUSE STOPS FOOLING YOU.
Better.
Then:
BUT SOMETIMES YOU DO IT ANYWAY.
There.
Humanity restored.

He became fascinated with repetition.
Why did people repeat things they regretted?
Why did he?
If insight worked, shouldn't noticing end behavior?
Apparently not.
This felt like false advertising.
He had believed self-awareness was a doorway.
Now it looked more like a flashlight.
Useful.
But a flashlight does not move your feet.

Baseball again.

He made another error weeks later.
Different game.
The old reaction began.
You fucking idiot.
He heard it.
Then his mother's voice.
You don't have to hate yourself to improve yourself.
He nearly laughed on the field.
Not because the sentence was funny.
Because his mother had somehow infiltrated baseball.
He reset.
Badly.
Then better.
Next pitch.
Nothing dramatic happened.

Afterward he wrote no essay.
This may have been progress.

Music remained less cooperative.
He could manage his internal life around errors but still found himself adjusting taste depending upon company.
One night someone put on a freestyle record he loved.
A guy beside him made a face.
The protagonist almost made the same face.
Caught it halfway.
His mouth literally changed direction.
Manny saw.
Of course.
"What the fuck was that?"
"What?"
"Your face just changed its mind."
The protagonist laughed.
The other guy looked over.
"You like this shit?"

There it was.
Tiny trial.
No meaningful stakes.
Which made the answer somehow harder.
"Yeah."
The protagonist said it casually.
Too casually.
The guy shrugged.
"It's corny."
"Sometimes corny is good."
Manny stared.
The protagonist could feel history moving.
Not cultural history.
Nothing that important.
Personal history.
Approximately half an inch.

Then a hip-hop track came on and he loved that too.
No synthesis required.
No manifesto.
Two songs.
He danced to both.
The republic survived.

He was learning that many identities were defended because surrendering them felt like disappearing.
Smart.
Tough.
Bronx.
Writer.
Baseball player.
Independent.
Honest.
Skeptical.
Guy who didn't care what people thought.

This last identity required enormous amounts of thought about what people thought.
He did not fully appreciate the irony.

College became more real.
Applications.
Essays.
Forms.
He was asked to write about himself.
This should have been easy.
He had been writing about himself for years.
It was impossible.
What version did they want?
Resilient kid?
Curious student?
Athlete?
Bronx story?
Family story?
Writer?
Future lawyer?
He could produce any of them.
That was the problem.

The essay prompt asked, in some polite institutional manner:
Who are you?
He stared.
Finally, bureaucracy had asked the one question he had been avoiding with professional seriousness.
He began:
I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CURIOUS—
Deleted.
Too generic.
He began:
GROWING UP IN THE BRONX—

Stopped.
He could feel himself arranging the neighborhood for strangers.
Hardship here.
Color there.
Family warmth.
Street wisdom.
A little danger.
Not enough to frighten admissions.
He hated himself for seeing the machinery.
Then hated himself for assuming everyone else did not.

He tried humor.
Too casual.
Tried sincerity.
Sounded fake.
Tried intelligence.
Sounded like he wanted them to know he was intelligent.
Which he did.
That made it worse.

His brother walked past.
"What you doing?"
"College essay."
"What's it about?"
"Me."
His brother laughed.
"You're fucked."
This was, unfortunately, the most accurate guidance he received.

He eventually wrote about reading.
Not the Bronx.
Not poverty.
Not struggle.

Reading.
How he loved sentences that changed depending upon who was reading them.
How one book could make him certain and the next make him suspicious of the certainty.
How he had begun to enjoy discovering that something he believed was incomplete.
This was not entirely true.
He enjoyed it afterward.
During the collapse he was usually furious.
Admissions did not need every operational detail.

He wrote:
I USED TO THINK LEARNING MEANT COLLECTING ANSWERS. I AM BEGINNING TO SUSPECT IT MAY HAVE MORE TO DO WITH IMPROVING THE QUESTIONS.
He stared.
Very good.
He was definitely keeping that.
Then he worried it sounded like something somebody else had said.
Probably because many people had.
Originality is often a teenager discovering something ancient without footnotes.
He kept it anyway.

He showed the essay to his teacher.
She read.
"Good."
He waited.
"But?"
She smiled.
"You know there's a but."
"There's always a but."

"You're trying very hard to sound like someone who doesn't try hard."
He stared.
"Where?"
She pointed to several sentences.
He read them.
She was right.
He hated her.
"Take some of the performance out."
"What performance?"
She looked at him.
He laughed.
"Fine."

He revised.
Removed the smartest sentence.
Put it back.
Removed it again.
Rewrote it worse.
Then better.
Finally the essay became less impressive.
Also more his.
This annoyed him.

At home his father asked:
"What'd you write about?"
"Reading."
"No baseball?"
"No."
"No Bronx?"
"No."
His father shrugged.
"Good."
The protagonist looked at him.
"Why good?"

"Everybody already knows you're from the Bronx."
This had never occurred to him.
He had been treating geography like a thesis.
His father treated it like an address.

That night he reread pages from the past year.
The notebooks were becoming less funny.
Not humorless.
Humor mattered too much.
But the jokes no longer always closed the case.
Sometimes they opened it.
He saw that.
He wrote:
A JOKE CAN TELL THE TRUTH.
Then:
A JOKE CAN ALSO HELP YOU GET AWAY FROM IT.
He smiled.
Then added:
THE ANNOYING PART IS IT CAN DO BOTH AT THE SAME TIME.
He closed the notebook.
No need to prosecute the sentence.
It already knew.

He was seventeen.
He knew more than he had at nine.
Obviously.
He had vocabulary now.
History.
Books.
Arguments.
Medication.
Baseball.
Girls.
Failures.

A few apologies.
A growing collection of sentences that sounded wiser than the person writing them.
But knowing had begun changing shape.
It no longer meant simply possessing the answer.
Sometimes knowing meant losing an excuse.
This was considerably less fun.

His mother called from the other room.
"Come eat."
"I'm coming."
He stayed seated.
Five seconds.
Ten.
Then he heard himself.
He smiled.
"Coming."
He stood immediately.
Not enlightenment.
Not transformation.
Dinner.
But the gap between the word and the body had gotten a little shorter.
For a boy who had spent years explaining the distance, movement was probably the better argument.

Chapter 11

"The Distance Between Saying and Doing"

By seventeen, he had become suspicious of people who described themselves with adjectives.
Honest.
Loyal.
Hardworking.
Open-minded.
Real.
Good.
He had begun to think adjectives were reputational credit.
You could spend them before earning them.
This did not stop him from using them internally.
He was honest.
Mostly.
He was loyal.
Usually.
He was open-minded.
Within reason.
He was independent.
Except when he desperately needed approval.
He was not yet sophisticated enough to recognize that qualifying your bullshit does not necessarily make it less bullshit.
Sometimes it just improves the warranty.

College applications moved outward into the mail.
Once an envelope left his hands, control became fantasy.

He hated this.
There were no dashboards.
No portals.
No status refresh.
No little green check indicating somebody had opened his future.
You mailed things.
Then waited.
The United States Postal Service became a psychological experiment.
Every afternoon carried possibility.
Every envelope from a school could alter the architecture of the next several years.
Most mail was not for him.
This felt personally insulting.

Waiting produced imagination.
Imagination produced outcomes.
By the second week, he had attended several colleges mentally.
At one he became a lawyer.
At another he became a writer.
At another baseball took over and everything changed.
At one imaginary school he met a woman whose face had not yet been invented.
He became very successful there.
Success remained conveniently undefined.
Money.
Respect.
Freedom.
Being invited into rooms.
Not needing anybody's permission.
Being known by people whose opinions mattered.
He had not yet determined who those people were.
This did not interfere with ambition.

Manny thought the whole process was funny.
"You check the mail like there's money in it."
"There might be."
"From college?"
"Scholarships."
"You think they're sending cash?"
"You know what I mean."
"No. I don't."
Manny enjoyed forcing figurative language into literal court.
The protagonist had taught him too well.

One afternoon there was an envelope.
Thin.
This mattered.
Everyone knew thick was good.
Nobody seemed able to identify where this knowledge came from, but everybody knew it.
Thin meant rejection.
He stood in the hallway holding it.
The school had been one of the reaches.
He had not admitted how much he wanted it.
This was strategic.
Wanting quietly reduced public losses.
He opened it.
Words arranged themselves politely around no.
Thank you.
Impressive applicants.
Difficult decision.
Unable.
Best wishes.
Institutional rejection was remarkably courteous.
They had denied his imagined future while wishing him every success inside whatever inferior future remained.
He hated them.

For approximately seven minutes.

Then analysis began.
Grades.
Obviously.
Maybe the essay.
No.
Essay was good.
Too many applicants.
Geographic considerations.
Money.
Connections.
Who knew what admissions really looked for?
He had heard stories.
Everybody had.
Some kid with worse grades got in somewhere because his father knew somebody.
Another kid got rejected despite everything.
Standards were arbitrary.
Colleges cared more about numbers than actual intelligence.
Potential was difficult to measure.
He built the case quickly.
Experienced counsel.

His mother came home.
"Anything?"
He folded the letter.
"No."
She looked at him.
"No mail or no?"
He hated maternal precision.
"I didn't get in."
She stopped.
"Oh."
He waited for outrage.

Comfort.
Something.
She walked toward him and hugged him.
He allowed approximately two seconds before his body became embarrassed.
"It's fine."
"I know."
"I didn't really want to go there."
His mother released him.
That quickly.
Too quickly.
She looked at him.
"You did."
"Not that much."
"You did."
He felt annoyed.
"How would you know?"
"Because you're my son."
Again, this apparently served as universal subpoena power.

"It's probably better."
He began listing reasons.
Cost.
Location.
Other schools.
Maybe baseball.
The program wasn't perfect.
His mother listened.
He could hear himself trying to erase desire before disappointment finished happening.
She said:
"You don't have to make it a bad school because they didn't take you."
He stopped.
This was intolerable.

"I didn't."
"You are."
"I'm saying there are other options."
"That's different."
He went quiet.
She touched his cheek.
"You wanted it."
He looked away.
"Yeah."
"You're disappointed."
"Yeah."
"Okay."
He waited.
That was all.
Okay.
No theory.
No compensation.
No reclassification.
He despised the simplicity.
Then, against his wishes, felt better.

He kept the rejection letter.
This surprised him.
He almost threw it away.
Instead it went between notebook pages.
Evidence.
Not of injustice.
Not of failure.
Something had happened.
That was enough.

A second school accepted him.
The envelope was thick.
Everybody had been right.
This annoyed him for separate reasons.

There were forms.
Congratulations.
Deadlines.
Instructions.
Possibility suddenly had paperwork again.
His father shook his hand.
Then pulled him into a hug with one arm.
A masculine merger.
His mother cried.
This embarrassed him more than his own happiness.
His brother said:
"Look at this asshole. College."
The protagonist smiled.
He liked being the asshole this time.

The acceptance changed him immediately in ways he pretended it did not.
He walked around with a secret elevation.
Not superiority.
He would have rejected that word.
Possibility.
He possessed proof that somewhere beyond the neighborhood an institution had evaluated him and said yes.
He tried not to make this mean too much.
It meant too much.

People asked where he was going.
He told them.
Each time the name sounded slightly more impressive.
He learned which audiences recognized it.
Which didn't.
Recognition changed how he pronounced the answer.
Not consciously.
Mostly.
With people who knew the school, he said the name casually.

With people who did not, he added information.
Good program.
Good school.
Baseball.
Selective enough.
He did not say selective enough.
He conveyed it.
There are many forms of autobiography.
Some are performed through tone.

Manny caught him adding context.
"Why you giving everybody the brochure?"
"They asked."
"They asked where."
"They don't know the school."
"So?"
"They might think it's some bullshit place."
Manny looked at him.
"You care?"
"No."
Manny smiled.
The protagonist sighed.
"Fine."

He did care.
That was the irritating part.
Leaving was not enough.
The leaving had to mean something.
He wanted the school to confirm that he had not merely gone somewhere.
He had ascended.
This was ugly.
He knew it.
Knowing did not immediately remove it.
Knowing isn't enough.

Ana again.
Everybody had become a fucking chorus.

He and Ana were still together in the imprecise teenage way that allowed each of them to deny the word when convenient and demand its obligations when threatened.
College had entered between them.
Not physically.
Yet.
But future distance was now sitting at the table.
Ana noticed first.
"You talk about next year like nobody's in it."
He frowned.
"What does that mean?"
"Exactly what I said."
"You're in it."
"Where?"
"In my life."
"That's not what I asked."
He felt the trap.
"You're asking where we'll be."
"I'm asking if you've thought about it."
"Of course."
This was not exactly true.
He had thought about missing her.
About visiting.
About whether he would meet someone else.
About whether she would.
About whether wanting freedom made him disloyal.
He had thought about everything except an actual plan.

"What did you think?" she asked.
He looked at her.

There are moments when a person knows the honest answer will produce pain and begins searching for a technically honest answer that produces less.
He had years of training.
"I don't know what's going to happen."
True.
Ana nodded.
"I know."
He relaxed too early.
"What do you want to happen?"
There.
The real question.
He looked away.
"I want us to stay close."
This was also true.
It was not the whole truth.
He wanted to stay close and become free.
He wanted fidelity without limitation.
He wanted adventure without loss.
He wanted her available as emotional home while reserving his own future for expansion.
At seventeen, this arrangement seemed less selfish than mathematically elegant.

Ana watched him.
"Close."
"What?"
"You said close."
"Yeah."
"Not together."
He felt accused.
"I didn't say not together."
"You didn't say together."
"Jesus Christ."
Language had finally turned against its longtime employee.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.
"What?"
"Answer exactly enough that you can't be accused of lying."
He went still.
The sentence reached backward.
California.
His mother's questions.
Manny.
College.
Parties.
Where he had been.
What he wanted.
Who he was.
Technical truth.
He became angry because the evidence was organized better than he liked.
"I don't do that."
Ana laughed once.
Not because it was funny.
He heard it immediately.
There it was again.

"Fine. Sometimes."
"Why?"
"I don't know."
"You do."
"No, I actually don't."
For once, this was true.
He had explanations.
He could supply fear.
Conflict avoidance.
Need for control.
Wanting options.
Childhood habits.

Maybe all.
But the raw answer sat underneath.
He did not want to lose anything.
He did not want to choose.
Choice created the thing not chosen.
He hated that.

"I don't want to hurt you."
Ana looked at him.
"Then don't."
Simple.
Impossible.
He felt almost angry at her for making it sound simple.
"What if I'm honest and that hurts you?"
"Then I'm hurt."
He stared.
"And that's it?"
"What do you mean?"
"I don't know."
"You're trying to make honesty guarantee a good outcome."
He said nothing.
She continued.
"It doesn't."
He hated this.
Honesty without reward felt like bad policy.

"What do you want?" she asked.
He waited too long.
That was already an answer.
"I don't know."
Ana nodded.
Not dramatically.
Not wounded theater.
Just information received.
"Okay."

He wanted her to fight.
That would prove something.
She didn't.
They walked.
This was worse.

A few days later they kissed like people trying to solve a problem physically.
This has a low success rate.
Desire temporarily erased logistics.
Then logistics returned wearing the same clothes.

Sex entered his life not as revelation but confusion with better lighting.
He had expected instinct.
There was instinct.
He had not expected awkwardness.
There was plenty.
Bodies did not behave like stories boys told.
Neither did people.
He discovered that wanting sex and being ready for intimacy were not related as neatly as teenage conversation suggested.
He also discovered that male confidence was frequently post-production.
Boys told the finished version.
Nobody reported uncertainty.
Nobody said:
I was scared.
I didn't know what she wanted.
I worried I was doing something wrong.
I cared too much whether I seemed experienced.
I thought about how I looked while trying to forget I had a body.
Instead:
"Yeah, we hooked up."

Magnificent.
Entire psychological civilizations compressed into four words.

After one intimate night with Ana, they lay quietly.
He felt peaceful.
Then immediately began thinking about whether he had performed well.
This was absurd.
He knew it was absurd.
He continued.
She turned toward him.
"What are you thinking?"
"Nothing."
Ancient answer.
Reliable.
She smiled.
"You're thinking."
"Yeah."
"What?"
He almost said things.
Instead, maybe because the room was dark, maybe because he was tired, maybe because vulnerability had already happened and further resistance seemed inefficient, he said:
"Whether you thought it was good."
Ana laughed.
His soul left his body.
"Don't laugh."
"I'm not laughing at you."
"That's exactly what you're doing."
She put her face against his shoulder.
Still laughing.
"This is fucking humiliating."
"You asked."
"I didn't ask yet."

"You were going to."
He hated being known.

"Was it?"
He regretted the question during pronunciation.
She looked up.
"Was what?"
"Come on."
"Say it."
"Fuck you."
She laughed again.
Then kissed him.
"Yes."
Relief.
Enormous.
Embarrassing.
He hated how much he needed it.

"You know you don't have to know everything, right?" she said.
"What does that have to do with anything?"
"Nothing."
He looked at her.
She smiled.
It was unfair to weaponize themes during intimacy.

Afterward, he understood why boys lied.
Not approved.
Understood.
Sex exposed too much uncertainty.
A lie restored control.
You became experienced afterward.
Confident afterward.
Detached afterward.
The story could be cleaner than the body.

He recognized the architecture because he had been building similar structures all his life.

A few days later Manny asked:
"So?"
The protagonist knew exactly what he meant.
"So what?"
"You know what."
"Nothing."
Manny looked at him.
The protagonist smiled.
Manny's eyes widened.
"Oh shit."
"Relax."
"Professor!"
"Shut the fuck up."
Manny laughed.
Then waited for details.
The protagonist felt pressure.
This was the part.
The male report.
He could exaggerate.
Minimize.
Protect Ana.
Protect himself.
Perform.
He chose:
"It was good."
Manny waited.
"That's it?"
"Yeah."
"No details?"
"No."
Manny looked genuinely surprised.
"Why?"

The protagonist shrugged.
"Because it's none of your business."
Manny stared.
Then nodded.
"All right."
No ridicule.
No accusation of softness.
Nothing.
The protagonist had defended against consequences that did not arrive.
This happened often.
Human beings construct prisons from anticipated witnesses.

Manny changed the subject.
The protagonist felt strangely grateful.
He never said so.
One revolution at a time.

The year continued moving.
His medication became routine enough to stop being narratively interesting to everyone except him.
He sometimes resented needing it.
Sometimes forgot to take it.
Sometimes deliberately didn't.
He wanted to know whether he could do things without assistance.
This was less about medicine than pride.
He did not call it pride.
He called it testing himself.
Better branding.

One day he skipped it before an exam.
No good reason.
He wanted proof.
Proof of what?

That the ability belonged to him.
As if attention were property disputed in court.
He struggled.
Not catastrophically.
Enough.
He lost track.
Reread questions.
Ran short on time.
Finished angry.
The grade came back lower than expected.
He felt vindicated and defeated simultaneously.
Vindicated because the medication worked.
Defeated because the medication worked.
He hated paradoxes when they involved his own body.

His brother said:
"Why'd you stop taking it?"
"Just one day."
"Why?"
"I wanted to see."
"See what?"
"If I needed it."
His brother stared.
"And?"
The protagonist looked at the test.
"I don't know."
His brother laughed.
"Looks like you found out."
"That's not the point."
"What is the point?"
He had no good answer.
Pride rarely survives translation into plain language.

He resumed.
No ceremony.

No acceptance speech.
He did not become pro-medication or anti-medication.
He took something that helped with certain things and complicated how he thought about himself.
This was less satisfying than an ideology.
It was also his life.

He began writing more intensely.
Pages now.
Not just fragments.
One night he wrote about laziness.
He had been called lazy.
Not constantly.
Enough.
Teachers had said he failed to apply himself.
Relatives said he could do anything if he focused.
Potential again.
Potential can sound like praise for years before revealing itself as accusation.
Why aren't you what we think you could be?
He hated that question even when nobody said it aloud.

He wrote:
LAZY IS WHAT PEOPLE CALL THE DISTANCE BETWEEN WHAT THEY THINK YOU COULD DO AND WHAT YOU ACTUALLY DO.
Then:
SOMETIMES THEY ARE RIGHT.
He paused.
Then:
SOMETIMES THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THE DISTANCE IS MADE OF.
He liked this.
Attention.
Fear.

Boredom.
Depression, though he did not use the word about himself.
Bad instruction.
No sleep.
No money.
No example.
No hope.
Avoidance.
Entitlement.
Laziness itself.
Too many causes again.

Then he thought of himself.
How many times had he used complexity to avoid the obvious?
Sometimes he had simply not done the work.
No diagnosis.
No oppression.
No philosophical structure.
He hadn't done it.
That answer felt politically inadequate and personally accurate.
He wrote:
SOMETIMES I HAD A REASON.
Then:
SOMETIMES I HAD AN EXCUSE.
Then:
SOMETIMES I JUST DIDN'T FUCKING DO IT.
He laughed.
That one had air.

He showed a longer essay to the teacher who had told him he had a voice.
She read it over several days.
When she returned it, there were marks everywhere.

He hated marks.
Marks meant imperfection made visible.
She had written:
You are strongest when you stop explaining what the reader should conclude.
He read it twice.
"What does this mean?"
She pointed to a paragraph.
"You describe something beautifully here."
"Okay."
"Then you explain it."
"That's the point."
"No. The point was already there."
He frowned.
"How's the reader supposed to know?"
She smiled.
This was a trap.
"Trust them."
He nearly laughed.
Readers?
People misunderstood obvious things every day.
He had dedicated seventeen years to correcting them.
Now she wanted him to leave meaning unattended.

"What if they get it wrong?"
"They might."
"Then why write it?"
She looked at him.
"Do you want readers or hostages?"
He stared.
Excellent line.
He hated her.

That evening he reread the essay.
She was right.

He had written a scene.
Then prosecuted it.
Evidence.
Argument.
Conclusion.
He did not trust experience to carry meaning without commentary.
He deleted the explanation.
The scene became quieter.
Better.
He felt unnecessary.
This was painful.

He began experimenting.
Less explanation.
More people.
Let the father say the thing.
Let the mother laugh.
Let Manny be right without announcing he was right.
Let Ana misunderstand him.
Let him misunderstand her.
Let two people leave a room carrying different versions.
This was harder than argument.
Argument gave him authority.
Scenes gave people freedom.
He was not sure he liked that.

He wrote something about his mother.
Not sentimental.
He tried.
Her hands.
The way she moved around the kitchen while everyone else sat.
The way she could insult him without making him feel unloved.

The way she could say I don't know without appearing diminished.
He stopped.
That last part felt important.
He had spent years believing certainty created authority.
His mother often said she did not know.
People still listened.
Why?
Maybe because when she did know, she did not need theater.
He wrote that.
Then deleted it.
Too explanatory.
Good boy.

He left the image of her standing at the stove while five people argued around a table she had fed.
That was enough.
Maybe.

He showed it to her.
This was terrifying.
She read slowly.
He watched her face.
She reached the end.
Said nothing.
He waited.
"Well?"
She looked up.
"You make me sound tired."
He laughed.
"You are tired."
"Not all the time."
"That's what you got from it?"
She smiled.
"It's nice."

Nice.
He had risked an internal organ for nice.
"Nice?"
"Very nice."
"That's worse."
She laughed.
Then folded the pages.
"Can I keep it?"
He stopped.
"Yeah."
She walked away carrying them.
He stood there.
No literary criticism had ever felt better.
He did not admit this.

A week later he found the pages tucked into a drawer with family documents.
Birth certificates.
Old photographs.
Important papers.
His essay.
He closed the drawer carefully.
Sometimes people tell you what something means without language.
He was beginning to notice.

The college departure moved closer.
Boxes appeared.
Lists.
Things he needed.
Things his mother insisted he needed.
Things his father said were a waste of money.
Towels.
Sheets.
Clothes.

A small fan.
A lamp.
Extension cords.
His entire future reduced to items that could fit in a car.
He felt excitement.
Fear.
Guilt.
All.

Manny pretended nothing was changing.
This worked until it didn't.
A few nights before the protagonist left, they sat on the stoop.
Same general place.
Different bodies.
Older boys now.
Or boys claiming older.
Kids ran past them.
The last step belonged to someone else now.
Governments had changed.

"You gonna come back acting white?" Manny asked.
The protagonist laughed.
"What the fuck does that mean?"
"You know."
"No, explain."
"See? You're already starting."
They laughed.
Then quiet.

"You gonna visit?"
"Obviously."
"That's what everybody says."
"Who is everybody?"
Manny looked at him.

"Don't."
The protagonist smiled.
"Yeah. I'll visit."
Manny nodded.
The protagonist wanted to say something larger.
Thank you.
You know me better than almost anybody.
You kept me from disappearing into my own bullshit.
I don't know who I become without this block, without you, without all of this.
He said:
"Don't be a stranger."
Manny stared.
"I'm staying here, asshole."
They both laughed.
Masculinity survived another dangerous moment.

Then Manny said:
"You know what's gonna happen?"
"What?"
"You're gonna meet people who believe all your shit."
The protagonist laughed.
"Fuck you."
"I'm serious."
"What shit?"
"All your versions."
The protagonist looked at him.
Manny continued.
"They won't know when you're doing it."
The protagonist smiled.
"Doing what?"
"Exactly."
Manny looked down the block.
"Just don't start believing all of them."
The protagonist was quiet.

That was too good.
He suspected Manny had accidentally become wise again.
This was infuriating.
"You practice these lines?"
"Yeah. I got notebooks."
"Fuck you."

The night before leaving, the protagonist could not sleep.
He sat by the window.
No notebook at first.
Just the city.
A siren.
Music.
A television through somebody else's wall.
People talking downstairs.
A car door.
Someone laughing.
Normal sounds.
He had spent years wanting more.
Now more had arrived and the ordinary suddenly looked expensive.
He felt sentimental.
This embarrassed him.

He opened a notebook.
Wrote:
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT A PLACE GAVE YOU UNTIL YOU HAVE TO LEAVE IT.
Too obvious.
He crossed it out.
Then:
LEAVING DOESN'T PROVE YOU OUTGREW SOMETHING.
Better.
Then:

STAYING DOESN'T PROVE YOU LOVE IT MORE.
He paused.
Then:
MAYBE WHERE YOU COME FROM ISN'T SOMETHING YOU OWE.
He stared.
That felt wrong.
Crossed out owe.
Wrote:
MAYBE WHERE YOU COME FROM ISN'T SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO REPAY.
Still wrong.
He crossed out the whole thing.
The problem was bigger than the sentence.

He looked outside.
His mother had spent years feeding him.
His father working.
His brother annoying him toward competence.
Manny laughing holes through his performances.
Ana making honesty inconvenient.
Teachers opening rooms.
Coaches teaching his body things his mind resisted.
The block.
The trains.
The arguments.
Music coming through walls.
Newspapers abandoned on seats.
Everybody had put something into him.
Some intentionally.
Some not.
Some good.
Some poisonous.
Most mixed.
He would carry it all.

Whether he wanted to or not.

He finally wrote:
I'M NOT LEAVING AS ONE PERSON.
Then stopped.
No explanation.
For once, he trusted the sentence.

Morning came.
Family moved faster than emotion.
Bags.
Breakfast.
Did you pack this?
Where's that?
Your father said—
Tell your brother—
Don't forget—
Call when—
No speeches.
Thank God.

Outside, Manny appeared.
Of course.
"Professor."
"Asshole."
They shook hands.
Then hugged.
Quick.
Hard.
No commentary.
When they separated, Manny said:
"Don't become a dick."
The protagonist laughed.
"Too late."
"True."

Then:
"Become a different kind."
"That's the plan."
There was no plan.

As the car pulled away, the protagonist watched the block through the rear window.
He had imagined this moment before.
He thought it would feel like escape.
It didn't.
Then he thought it would feel like loss.
Not exactly.
It felt like being divided.
The person leaving and the person remaining behind inside every story he would later tell.
He watched until the block disappeared.
Then turned around.
Forward.
At least physically.
The distinction would matter.
Because for the next several years he would enter rooms full of people who did not know his mother, his father, Manny, Ana, the stoop, the notebooks, the lies, the shirts, the radio, the arguments, the errors, the version of him who had once looked at the words THAT INCLUDES ME and crossed them out.
To those people, he could be almost anybody.
He knew this.
The knowledge thrilled him.
It should also have frightened him.
Eventually, it would.

Chapter 12

“Everybody Gets to Be New Once”

College had one immediate advantage.
Nobody knew him.
This was intoxicating.
It was also dangerous.
At home, every version of him had witnesses.
His mother knew what he looked like before language.
His father knew which stories improved in the retelling.
His brother had documentation.
Manny had archives.
Ana knew where certain doors were hidden.
College had none of this.
College met him at the front desk.
Name.
Room.
Key.
Next.
A human being reduced temporarily to administrative fact.
He loved it.

The campus looked richer than he expected.
Not necessarily rich.
Richer.
Brick buildings.
Grass maintained for purposes other than preventing mud.
Windows that seemed designed rather than merely installed.

People carrying stereos, milk crates, suitcases, pillows, typewriters, posters, rugs.
Parents moving furniture with expressions suggesting national emergency.
Some fathers wore loafers while carrying boxes.
This disturbed him.
Where he came from, moving furniture required older sneakers.
Class announced itself through details nobody had officially declared important.
He began collecting them immediately.

His roommate was named Peter.
Not Pete.
Peter.
The protagonist noticed this within thirty seconds.
Peter's parents were still in the room when he arrived.
His mother hugged him.
His father shook the protagonist's hand.
Firm.
Professional.
"Good to meet you."
"Good to meet you too."
The protagonist adjusted his voice without deciding to.
Not fake.
Cleaner.
Less Bronx around the edges.
A small linguistic ironing.
He heard himself doing it.
Could not stop.
Did not entirely want to.

Peter's father asked where he was from.
"The Bronx."
The response came as expected.

"Oh."
Not bad.
Not good.
Just enough pause to receive information larger than geography.
"What part?"
The protagonist named it.
Peter's father nodded.
He almost certainly did not know the part.
The protagonist respected that he did not pretend.
Then resented that he did not know.
This was efficient.

Peter's family had brought a small refrigerator.
The protagonist had not known students could have refrigerators.
This seemed extravagant.
Then he saw three more in the hallway.
Apparently refrigeration had entered higher education.
Peter's mother said:
"You're welcome to use it."
The protagonist smiled.
"Thanks."
He immediately liked her.
Then wondered if accepting refrigerator space established economic inferiority.
This is what happens when a seventeen-year-old discovers class analysis before discovering how exhausting it can become.

His own family arrived louder.
Not excessively.
Just comparatively.
His mother inspected everything.
The mattress.

The window.
The closet.
The bathroom down the hall.
The distance between the bed and radiator.
She had questions for no one in particular.
His father carried two bags at once, rejecting available assistance because assistance would reduce the moral value of lifting.
His brother sat on Peter's bed until told to move.
Peter's mother returned from the hallway and smiled at everyone.
The room became a small international summit.
Two families pretending this was ordinary.

His mother saw the refrigerator.
"Whose is that?"
"Peter's."
She looked at Peter.
"You have a refrigerator?"
Peter looked unsure whether he was being accused.
"Yeah."
His mother turned to the protagonist.
"You need one?"
"No."
"You sure?"
"Yes."
"What if you need cold things?"
"I'll use his."
Peter's mother said:
"Of course."
His mother nodded.
Diplomacy successful.
Then:
"You take turns cleaning it."
The protagonist wanted to disappear.

Peter's mother said:
"That's a good idea."
His mother had established jurisdiction in under four minutes.

His father looked out the window.
"Nice."
This one word carried money.
Opportunity.
Distance.
Pride.
Worry.
Maybe envy.
The protagonist supplied most of these meanings himself.
We should be careful here.
He had started assigning interiors to other people with increasing confidence.
His father may simply have liked the view.
The narrator, too, is vulnerable to architecture.

They unpacked.
The protagonist owned less than Peter.
Not dramatically less.
Enough for him to notice.
Peter had better towels.
This was absurd.
The protagonist had not previously understood towels could participate in class distinction.
Apparently everything was eligible.
Sheets.
Shoes.
Stereo equipment.
Laundry detergent.
How many jackets one person considered necessary.
The protagonist hated the whole system.

He also wanted better towels.

His mother made the bed.
He told her not to.
She ignored him.
At home this had been normal.
Here it made him feel eight.
Peter was arranging records alphabetically.
The protagonist watched his mother tuck the sheet tightly.
"Ma."
"What?"
"I got it."
"I know."
"Then—"
She looked at him.
He stopped.
There was that phrase again.
I got it.
His father.
Plumbing.
Him.
Inheritance already on campus.

When the family finally prepared to leave, his mother hugged him too long.
He allowed it.
This was progress or terror.
His father hugged him shorter.
His brother said:
"Don't fuck this up."
His mother slapped his brother's arm.
"What?"
"Good advice."
The protagonist laughed.
Then his father said:

"Call."
"I will."
"Not collect every five minutes."
"I know."
His mother said:
"Call collect."
His father looked at her.
She looked back.
Marriage.

Then they left.
The protagonist stood in the hallway after the elevator doors closed.
Something inside him shifted.
Not freedom.
Not sadness.
Weight distribution.
Until that moment, he had been visiting college with his family.
Now he was there.
Alone.
Almost.
Peter emerged from the room.
"You all right?"
"Yeah."
Peter nodded.
"Me too."
Neither had asked the second half.
They went back inside.

Peter had grown up in Westchester.
The protagonist knew very little about Westchester.
He knew it was north.
He knew houses.
He knew money.

He knew white people.
This was not enough information.
It did not prevent conclusions.
Peter's father was an attorney.
His mother worked in publishing.
They had a house.
Two cars.
Peter had gone to private school.
The protagonist assembled a category.
Privileged.
Probably sheltered.
Maybe entitled.
This took less than one evening.
Peter had not yet had time to earn any of it personally.
The protagonist considered himself a careful thinker.

That night, students gathered in rooms.
Doors stayed open.
This was deliberate architecture.
Everybody wanted to meet everybody before everybody chose everybody.
Freshman friendship began promiscuously.
Names.
Hometowns.
Majors.
Sports.
Music.
Schools.
The same questions repeated until biography became elevator speech.
He got good quickly.
"The Bronx."
Pause.
"New York City."
As though clarification were needed.

"Baseball."
"What position?"
Depends.
"I write."
This one he tested carefully.
Sometimes.
Not always.
The word changed him when spoken aloud.
Writer.
It felt presumptuous.
Law student had requirements.
Baseball player had statistics.
Writer apparently required only claiming the noun.
Dangerous category.

A girl from Connecticut asked:
"What do you write?"
"Everything."
This was false.
"What does that mean?"
"Essays. Stories. Just shit."
"Do you publish?"
He laughed.
"No."
"Then you're not a writer."
She smiled while saying it.
Maybe joking.
Maybe not.
He felt a small wound.
Immediately defended.
"Do you have to sell something to be a writer?"
"No, but like—"
"So if somebody paints and doesn't sell paintings, they're not a painter?"
"Fine. You're a writer."

The victory tasted bad.
He had forced her into giving him the word.
Now it felt counterfeit.

Later Peter said:
"You always do that?"
"Do what?"
"Argue people into agreeing with you."
The protagonist looked at him.
"She said something stupid."
"She was flirting with you."
He stopped.
"What?"
Peter laughed.
"Oh my God."
"What?"
"You're an idiot."
The protagonist stared toward the hallway where the girl had disappeared.
"She was flirting?"
"Obviously."
This was catastrophic.
The protagonist had won the argument and lost information of greater value.
He thought about finding her.
Did not.
Pride again.
A versatile disease.

The next morning, breakfast introduced the dining hall.
Unlimited food seemed briefly like socialism working.
He filled a tray irresponsibly.
Eggs.
Toast.
Bacon.

Cereal.
Juice.
Coffee he did not need.
Peter looked at the tray.
"Hungry?"
"It's there."
This was apparently sufficient economic theory.

They sat with people from the floor.
A Black kid from Queens named Malcolm.
A white girl from Long Island named Ellen.
A Korean-American student from New Jersey named David.
A guy from rural Pennsylvania named Tom who had never been to New York City.
The protagonist liked Tom immediately because Tom knew less about the city than anyone he had ever met and did not disguise it.
"Is the Bronx really dangerous?"
There it was.
Everyone looked at the protagonist.
He could feel identity arriving on schedule.
"Depends where."
Tom nodded.
"Like everywhere."
The protagonist almost became disappointed.
He had prepared more.

"Have you ever been robbed?"
Tom asked.
"No."
"Shot at?"
"No."
"Been in a gang?"
Malcolm started laughing.
The protagonist did too.

"No."
Tom looked embarrassed.
"Sorry."
"It's all right."
Then the protagonist added:
"I've seen some shit."
This was vague enough to restore narrative value.
Malcolm looked at him.
Not challenging.
Just looking.
The protagonist felt suddenly aware of himself.
Seen by someone who might know the difference between experience and packaging.
He ate bacon.

Later Malcolm said:
"You from the Bronx, for real?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Yeah."
"I know. I mean what part?"
He told him.
Malcolm nodded.
"My cousin lives not far."
Immediately the protagonist's Bronx became less exclusive.
He disliked this for approximately half a second.
Then recognized the absurdity.
Progress.
Tiny.
Unannounced.

Classes started.
The first lecture hall frightened him.
Not because of difficulty.
Scale.
Students who seemed prepared.

Notebooks open.
Pens ready.
Some had already read beyond the assignment.
This was offensive.
College had been sold to him as a place where smart people discovered themselves.
Apparently some smart people had also developed study habits.
Again, other people had been working while he was forming theories.

One professor spoke in a way he admired.
Slowly.
No wasted words.
Did not seem interested in being liked.
The protagonist mistook this for certainty.
Later he would discover professors could sound authoritative while revising themselves entirely the next semester.
At seventeen, cadence was evidence.

The class discussed political philosophy.
The protagonist came alive.
Power.
Rights.
Obligation.
State authority.
Freedom.
Exactly the material he had spent years turning family dinners into hostage situations over.
He raised his hand.
Made a point.
The professor responded:
"That's one way to frame it."
One way.
The protagonist waited for more.

The professor called on someone else.
This was humiliating.
His argument had not been defeated.
Worse.
It had been categorized.

Another student disagreed with him.
Calmly.
No insult.
No social stakes.
The student cited something the protagonist had not read.
This was new.
At home, he could often control the evidence pool.
College contained people who had read different books.
Unacceptable.
He wrote down the title immediately.

That afternoon he found the book in the library.
Not because he was open-minded.
Because he wanted ammunition.
Bad motives.
Excellent habits.
Still operational.

He read.
The opposing argument made sense.
This irritated him.
He read further.
Some of his own argument also remained valid.
More irritating.
He had hoped one book would kill one side.
Instead both survived.
He sat in the library annoyed at civilization.

Across the table, a student slept on an open textbook.

The protagonist looked at him.
For some reason this calmed him.
College contained idiots too.
Balance restored.

Baseball tryouts began.
This mattered more than he admitted.
At home, baseball had been part of identity.
Here, nobody cared what he had done before.
The field had no memory.
This was terrifying and fair.
He loved fairness until it reset his advantages.

There were better players.
He noticed immediately.
Faster.
Stronger.
Cleaner arms.
Some older.
Some bigger.
Some simply more comfortable.
He had been accustomed to entering a baseball space with a certain level of confidence.
Now confidence had to be renegotiated.
This felt like economic collapse.

One player hit balls with a sound the protagonist recognized instantly.
Different.
Not magic.
Velocity meeting barrel.
The protagonist watched.
The player did not appear to be trying especially hard.
This was insulting.
Talent should have the decency to look difficult.

The coach spoke briefly.
No inspirational speech.
Run.
Throw.
Hit.
Field.
Performance before biography.
The protagonist liked this.
Then wished biography counted.
Contradictions remained free of tuition.

During infield, he was fine.
Not great.
Fine.
Fine is a brutal category for someone accustomed to being notable.
He fielded cleanly.
Made throws.
No mistakes.
Nobody said anything.
Silence after competence can feel like criticism when ego expects recognition.

At bat he pressed.
First swing too hard.
Fouled back.
Second swing late.
Third ball he drove.
Good.
Not spectacular.
Enough.
The coach wrote something.
The protagonist wanted to know what.
He considered walking past later to see the clipboard.

Did not.
Character.
Or fear of being caught.
Let's not award medals prematurely.

Afterward, one of the other players introduced himself.
Marcus.
Outfielder.
From Brooklyn.
They talked.
Marcus had played against people the protagonist knew.
Names connected.
The city shrank.
Within five minutes they were comparing coaches, fields, teams, neighborhoods.
Not formally.
Social mapping.
Who was real.
Who was overrated.
Who could play.
Who talked.
Baseball had its own census.

Marcus asked:
"You nice?"
The protagonist laughed.
This question had two acceptable answers and both were dangerous.
If yes, arrogant.
If no, weak.
"I'm all right."
Marcus nodded.
This was the correct baseball answer.
Modesty coded for confidence.
If you were actually bad, you usually explained more.

"You?"
the protagonist asked.
Marcus smiled.
"I'm all right."
There.
Treaty.

They made the team.
Both.
The protagonist learned from a list.
His name printed among others.
No music.
No cinematic swelling.
He stared at it longer than necessary.
Relief first.
Then pride.
Then immediately:
Of course.
He had expected to make it.
This was retrospective dignity repair.
The twenty minutes before the list had contained less certainty.
Memory began editing immediately.

He called home.
His mother answered.
"I made the team."
She shouted to everyone before he finished.
He heard his father in the background.
His brother.
The protagonist smiled.
Then:
"Ma, relax."
He had called specifically for this reaction.

Humans remain difficult to defend.

His father got on.
"Knew you would."
The protagonist liked this.
Then wondered whether his father had actually known.
Then decided it did not matter.
Sometimes love speaks in false certainty because uncertainty is poor celebration.
He would understand this much later.
Or perhaps I am giving him too much credit now.

College expanded his class vocabulary.
Not academically.
Visually.
Students had things.
Cars.
Accounts.
Parents who mailed money.
Parents who called deans.
Parents who knew alumni.
Students who had traveled internationally and mentioned it the way he mentioned taking the train downtown.
A girl said:
"When we were in France last summer—"
He stopped listening temporarily.
France.
Last summer.
Casual France.
He had categories ready.
Rich.
Spoiled.
Disconnected.
Then she said her mother had grown up poor and built a business.

This complicated the category.
He resented biography for interfering with class analysis.

Another student wore expensive clothes and complained constantly about money.
The protagonist considered this offensive.
One night the student said:
"My parents aren't giving me anything besides tuition and housing."
The protagonist almost laughed.
Besides tuition and housing.
Language could perform miracles.
He wanted to say something.
Did not.
Then did later to someone else.
Growth had a time delay.

Peter invited him home one weekend.
The protagonist hesitated before accepting.
He wanted to see.
This embarrassed him.
Class curiosity can resemble tourism when directed upward too.
Nobody talks about that as much.

Peter's house was large.
Not mansion large.
Large enough that the protagonist revised the word house.
The driveway curved slightly.
Curved driveways offended him aesthetically and economically.
Why should a driveway require choreography?

Inside, everything was quiet.
Again.

Quiet.
He had noticed this in wealthy spaces before.
No television shouting from another room.
No neighbors through walls.
No sirens close enough to join conversation.
No relatives dropping in unannounced.
Silence appeared to be part of the purchase price.

Peter's mother made dinner.
His father opened wine.
They asked the protagonist questions.
Not interrogation.
Interest.
School.
Baseball.
What he read.
What he wanted to study.
He was waiting for something.
Condescension perhaps.
It did not arrive.
This was inconvenient.

Peter's father disagreed with him about welfare policy.
The protagonist prepared.
The older man listened.
Actually listened.
Then said:
"I think you're underestimating the unintended consequences."
The protagonist countered.
Peter's father nodded.
"That's possible."
Possible.
No dominance.
No insult.

This confused him.
He pushed harder.
The man still did not become angry.
The protagonist gradually realized he was attempting to create a fight the other person had not agreed to have.
He stopped.
Dinner continued.

Later Peter said:
"My dad likes you."
The protagonist felt relief.
Then immediately:
"Why wouldn't he?"
Peter stared.
The protagonist laughed.
"Forget it."

That night in the guest room, he looked around.
Bookshelves.
Good sheets.
Better towels.
Of course.
He thought about the family.
Nice.
Wealthy.
Thoughtful.
Maybe insulated.
Maybe not.
He did not know.
He felt something unpleasant.
Not envy exactly.
Possibility.
A different life had been imaginable all along.
People had grown up in houses where dinner arguments ended without anyone raising their voice.

Where college had always been assumed.
Where books were bought new.
Where a refrigerator in a dorm required no philosophical processing.
This did not make them better.
It also did not make the differences fake.

He thought about his own house.
Noise.
Bills.
Love disguised as insults.
Arguments over money.
His mother yelling from another room.
His father's chair.
The stoop.
Manny.
He felt defensive suddenly, though nobody had attacked any of it.
This was important.
Identity sometimes mobilizes against threats that have not occurred.

At breakfast Peter's father asked:
"Sleep well?"
"Yeah."
"Good."
The protagonist almost said the house was too quiet.
Did not.
He did not want quiet to sound like accusation.
Or admiration.
He had not decided which it was.

Back on campus, he told Marcus about Peter's house.
"Big?"
"Yeah."

"Rich?"
"Yeah."
Marcus nodded.
"Good for him."
The protagonist looked at him.
"That's it?"
"What else?"
"I don't know."
Marcus laughed.
"You wanted me to hate his house?"
"No."
Maybe.

Marcus had grown up in a small apartment in Brooklyn.
His mother worked in a hospital.
Father not around much.
He said it plainly.
No trauma performance.
No heroic frame.
The protagonist asked questions.
Marcus answered some.
Not others.
Then said:
"You analyze everybody?"
The protagonist smiled.
"Apparently."
"It's weird."
"Thank you."
"Not a compliment."
"I know."

The friendship developed anyway.
Marcus was less amused by the protagonist's identities than Manny had been.
Manny knew the original.

Marcus knew only the current release.
This changed the joke.
One night they were talking to students in another dorm.
A girl asked the protagonist what his father did.
He answered vaguely.
Then, for no necessary reason, improved the story.
Not dramatically.
A title shifted.
Responsibilities expanded.
The protagonist heard himself doing it.
Smooth.
Plausible.
No benefit.
Marcus looked at him.
The girl accepted it.
Conversation moved on.

Outside Marcus said:
"Why'd you say that?"
The protagonist knew immediately.
"Say what?"
"About your father."
"What about him?"
"That's not what you told me."
The old machinery started.
Depends how you describe the job.
He does different things.
I simplified before.
You misunderstood.
All available.
He selected:
"I don't know."
Marcus stared.
"That wasn't true."
"I know."

"Why'd you lie?"
"I don't know."
This answer was becoming increasingly important.
Marcus laughed.
Not warmly.
"That's some weird shit."
The protagonist felt defensive.
Then angry at the word weird.
Then embarrassed because it was weird.
"Who cares?"
"I don't."
"Then why ask?"
"Because I was standing there."
The protagonist shrugged.
"Forget it."
Marcus did.
At least outwardly.
The protagonist did not.

For the first time, the reinventions felt different.
In the Bronx, exaggeration had been partly performance among people who knew.
Everyone could see the seams.
College offered no seams unless he created them.
He could change a fact and the room simply received it.
No Manny coughing.
No brother appearing.
No mother calling from a window.
No local person accidentally walking through the story.
Freedom.
Yes.
Also something uglier.
If nobody knows the truth, lying stops feeling like resistance and starts feeling like authorship.

He began experimenting without admitting he was experimenting.
At one party he said he planned to become a journalist.
He had never seriously planned this.
For twenty minutes it felt true.
At another, architecture surfaced again.
An old invention.
Someone asked what interested him about it.
He surprised himself by answering well.
Buildings shape behavior.
Public space.
Class.
Who gets windows.
He almost convinced himself.
Maybe he should study architecture.
Then remembered he could not draw particularly well.
Minor issue.

The stories were rarely grandiose.
That mattered.
He did not claim wealth.
Fame.
Heroics.
Sometimes he made himself poorer.
Sometimes richer.
Sometimes more traveled.
Sometimes less experienced.
Sometimes tougher.
Sometimes bookish.
Sometimes indifferent to books.
What changed was not always status.
It was shape.
He was trying on biographies the way other students tried majors.

Marcus eventually caught another one.
This time involving where the protagonist had spent a summer.
Nothing important.
The protagonist gave a version.
Marcus frowned.
"I thought you said you were in the city."
"I was."
"You just said—"
"Part of the summer."
Marcus stared.
"Did you?"
The protagonist smiled.
Wrong move.
Marcus shook his head.
"You enjoy this."
"What?"
"This."
"It's nothing."
"That's why it's weird."
They walked.
Marcus continued.
"If you were trying to get something, I'd understand."
"That's worse."
"Maybe. But it'd make sense."
The protagonist laughed.
"So you're upset because my lies lack proper economic incentive?"
"I'm not upset."
"Then stop interrogating me."
Marcus looked at him.
"You interrogate everybody."
Fair.
"Occupational hazard."
"What's your occupation?"

The protagonist opened his mouth.
Marcus started laughing.
"Don't."
They both laughed.
The tension passed.
Not the question.

Classes became harder.
Actual work accumulated.
Reading could no longer remain pleasure alone.
Assigned reading has a remarkable capacity to damage books.
He would open something he might otherwise love and resent it because Tuesday had placed a deadline on the relationship.
Medication helped him stay with it.
Sometimes.
Other times he stared at the same page while thinking about baseball, Ana, home, sex, money, music, a sentence someone said at lunch, a jacket he wanted, whether Peter liked him, whether Marcus distrusted him, whether college was changing his accent, whether changing his accent meant anything.
Attention was not a light switch.
It was weather.
Medication changed the forecast.
It did not abolish climate.

He called Ana less.
Then felt guilty.
Then called out of guilt.
She could tell.
This irritated him because it exposed motive.
One night she said:

"You don't have to call because you think you're supposed to."
"I wanted to."
"Okay."
"I did."
"Okay."
"Stop."
"What?"
"You know what."
Silence.
Distance had given their old patterns room to echo.

He missed her.
Also enjoyed being away from her.
Both.
Again.
He did not know how to tell someone:
I love what we are and I also like discovering who I am when you are not here.
It sounded like abandonment.
Maybe it partly was.

On campus, attraction became constant ambient noise.
Girls from places he had never been.
Accents.
Styles.
Bodies.
Ways of speaking.
Students sat on beds in dorm rooms with doors closed and no parents anywhere in the building.
Civilization had clearly collapsed.
He was delighted.

He flirted.
At first harmlessly.

Then less harmlessly.
He told himself nothing counted if nothing physical happened.
Convenient rule.
Then a girl kissed him.
He kissed back.
Long enough for the definition problem to disappear.

Afterward, she smiled.
He felt adrenaline.
Desire.
Guilt.
Pride.
Fear.
He wanted to kiss her again.
Also wanted time to reverse.
Both emotions arrived fully funded.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked.
There are questions that reveal character less by the answer than by the delay.
He delayed.
"No."
Technically, perhaps.
Ana and he had never made the word particularly official.
The protagonist knew this defense would later embarrass him.
It did not stop him.

The girl nodded.
They kissed again.
There.
Choice.
No philosophical ambiguity required.
He made one.

Walking back to his dorm, he felt sick.
Not dramatically.
His body knew before his vocabulary agreed.
He began preparing explanations.
Ana and he had not defined things.
Distance changed relationships.
He was young.
College was new.
He had not planned it.
It was only kissing.
Nothing serious.
They might break up anyway.
He was confused.
All facts or near-facts.
A beautiful legal team.

Then a simpler sentence arrived.
I wanted to kiss her.
Yes.
That was the problem.
Not the whole explanation.
Enough.

He did not tell Ana.
This mattered.
He told himself he was protecting her from unnecessary pain.
Maybe.
He was also protecting himself from consequences.
Two things can be true.
That phrase had become less comforting.

He called her the next night.
She sounded happy to hear him.

This made it worse.
He became unusually affectionate.
Compensation disguised as tenderness.
Humans are capable of contaminating even kindness.

"What's with you?" she asked.
"Nothing."
"You sound weird."
"I miss you."
True.
She softened.
He hated himself a little.
Then remembered his mother's warning about using hate as improvement.
He disliked himself constructively.
This was probably the same thing wearing glasses.

He did not write about the kiss.
For three days.
This was extraordinary.
The notebooks had received municipal finance, race, capitalism, masculinity, poverty, baseball errors, self-hatred, sex, his mother's birthday.
But not this.
The omission became louder than writing.
Every time he opened the notebook, the missing event sat on the page.
He wrote around it.
Class.
College.
Peter.
Money.
The library.
Nothing.

Finally:
I KISSED SOMEONE ELSE.
He looked at the sentence.
No style.
No defense.
Then wrote her name.
The girl's.
Immediately crossed it out.
Why protect her identity in a notebook nobody was supposed to read?
Maybe because names made things real.
Maybe because he wanted the page to preserve his privacy.
Maybe because he was already imagining discovery.
We can invent motives forever.
He knew only that he crossed it out.

Then:
I TOLD HER I DIDN'T HAVE A GIRLFRIEND.
He paused.
I CAN EXPLAIN WHY THAT WAS TECHNICALLY TRUE.
Long pause.
WHICH PROBABLY MEANS IT WASN'T TRUE ENOUGH.
He closed the notebook.

Weeks later he went home.
The Bronx looked smaller.
He hated himself for noticing.
Not physically.
Readable.
He could see the block faster now.
College had given him contrast.
Contrast can feel like betrayal.

His mother hugged him.
Father asked about baseball.

Brother asked whether he'd gotten laid.
Normal government resumed.
Manny came by.
They walked.
The protagonist told stories.
College people.
Professor.
Team.
Rich roommate.
Dining hall.
Women.
Not the kiss.

Manny listened.
Then:
"You sound different."
The protagonist froze.
"How?"
"I don't know."
"Like what?"
"I just said I don't know."
"Accent?"
"No."
"Words?"
Manny laughed.
"Why you scared?"
"I'm not."
"You are."
The protagonist hated that everybody had become fluent in his face.

"Different bad?"
Manny looked at him.
"I didn't say bad."
"Then why say it?"

"Because you sound different."
The protagonist waited.
Manny shrugged.
"You're supposed to."
This was not what he expected.
"That's it?"
"What you want me to say? College turned you white?"
The protagonist laughed.
"You already used that."
"Still available."

They passed familiar buildings.
People recognized him.
Some did not.
A younger kid had grown.
A store had changed.
Someone had moved.
Someone had been arrested.
Someone's parents had split.
The block had not frozen for his departure.
This seemed unfair.
Home was supposed to preserve itself so travelers could measure change against something stable.
Home refused the assignment.

At dinner, his mother asked if college was what he expected.
He said:
"Kind of."
Father:
"People smart?"
"Some."
Brother:
"So same as everywhere."
They laughed.
The protagonist smiled.

Yes.
Same as everywhere.
Not same at all.

Later he sat in his old room.
The room felt both his and not.
His notebooks were there.
Older ones.
He opened one.
Nine years old.
Municipal default.
Nobody knows shit.
He smiled.
Then he looked around.
This version of himself had witnesses everywhere.
A mark on the wall.
Old baseball equipment.
A drawer that stuck.
A book with his name written inside badly.
He felt relief.
No need to explain who he was.
Then fear.
Because here they knew.

Manny came over late.
Sat in the room.
Looked at a college sweatshirt draped over the chair.
"Look at you."
"What?"
"Nothing."
The protagonist threw something at him.
Manny laughed.
Then picked up a notebook.
The protagonist grabbed it.
"No."

"You still doing this?"
"Yeah."
"Professor Bullshit goes to college."
"Advanced degree."

They talked.
Nothing important.
Everything important.
People.
Music.
Baseball.
Ana.
There.
Manny asked.
"You and Ana good?"
The protagonist said:
"Yeah."
Too fast.
Manny looked at him.
The protagonist looked back.
No joke came.
Manny knew something.
Not what.
Enough.

"What?" Manny said.
"Nothing."
He waited.
Manny waited.
Old technology.
The protagonist almost told him.
Then didn't.
Why?
Shame.
Fear.

Privacy.
Desire to keep his image.
Concern Manny would judge him.
Concern Manny wouldn't.
Maybe all.

Manny changed subject.
The protagonist felt both saved and abandoned.
He was becoming very demanding of other people's intuition.

The next day he saw Ana.
The sight of her rearranged him.
No theory.
She smiled.
Ran toward him.
Hugged him.
He held her.
Guilt arrived inside affection.
This seemed cruel.
He had assumed guilt would replace love.
Instead both occupied the same body.
Again, the kitchen had warned him years earlier.
Contradictions do not wait outside politely for other contradictions to leave.

"You look good," she said.
"So do you."
"You got skinny."
"No I didn't."
"Little."
"College food."
"You eat like an animal."
"Exactly."
They laughed.

Familiar.
Easy.
Dangerous.

She looked at him.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Why are you looking at me?"
"I missed you."
He swallowed.
"Missed you too."
True.
The truth hurt worse when standing beside what he had hidden.

They spent the afternoon together.
No confession.
He almost told her several times.
Each opportunity passed.
Then the next became harder.
By evening, silence had acquired investment.
The longer he waited, the confession would include not only the kiss but the hours of not confessing.
Tomorrow would add a day.
Next week, a week.
Lies collect interest.
He knew this.
Still borrowed.

That night, back home, he wrote:
THE FIRST LIE IS SOMETIMES JUST WHAT HAPPENED.
Then:
THE SECOND LIE IS LETTING SOMEBODY KEEP BELIEVING SOMETHING BECAUSE CORRECTING THEM COSTS YOU.

He stared.
This sounded self-important.
He crossed out lie.
Wrote dishonesty.
Worse.
Changed it back.
Then shut the notebook.
Language could not save him.

College had taught him several things already.
People with money could be kind.
People without money could be assholes.
Smart people could disagree.
Good writers could write boring things.
Confident athletes could be terrified.
Medication could help without answering what help meant.
A dorm room could contain six invented versions of the same person before midnight.
And a boy who prided himself on honesty could kiss someone, withhold it, call the withholding kindness, recognize the excuse, and continue withholding anyway.
This last lesson had tuition.

He returned to campus carrying clean laundry his mother had folded.
He had protested.
Not very hard.
Peter was already there.
"Good weekend?"
"Yeah."
"You see your girlfriend?"
The protagonist stopped.
Peter had used the word without permission.
"Girlfriend?"
Peter looked confused.

"Ana."
"Yeah."
"Good?"
"Yeah."
Peter nodded and kept unpacking.
The protagonist stood there.
He had not corrected him.
Interesting.

That night, he attended a party.
Music loud.
Room packed.
Somebody had acquired alcohol through ancient undergraduate channels.
The protagonist talked to a girl he had never met.
She asked where he was from.
"The Bronx."
"What do your parents do?"
He answered.
Correctly.
No embellishment.
"What are you studying?"
"I don't know yet."
Correct.
"You play baseball?"
"Yeah."
"Any good?"
He smiled.
"I'm all right."
Correct enough.
"What do you want to do after college?"
He started to say law.
Stopped.
"I don't know."
She nodded.

No punishment.
No loss of status.
Nothing collapsed.

Then she asked:
"Do you have a girlfriend?"
The room seemed briefly quieter.
It wasn't.
He thought of Ana.
The kiss.
Peter's word.
Manny's face.
His notebook.
He said:
"Yeah."
The girl smiled.
"She's here?"
"No. Back home."
"That's hard."
"Yeah."
She turned the conversation toward something else.
That was it.
No medal.
No moral music.
He had simply told the truth before the lie became useful.

He stood there listening to the music.
A record came on that, in another room, with different people, he might have pretended not to like.
He liked it.
Someone beside him complained.
He shrugged.
Still liked it.
Small things.

Later, walking back across campus, cold beginning to settle into the night, he thought about telling Ana.
He decided he would.
Not because he had become brave.
Because the cost of continuing had finally become greater than the cost of stopping.
There is a less flattering name for much of human growth.
Economics.

He reached his dorm.
Went upstairs.
Peter was asleep.
The room was dark except for light from the hallway.
The small refrigerator hummed.
He smiled at it.
Once, this refrigerator had represented an entire class system.
Now it contained orange juice and somebody's leftover sandwich.
Objects suffer under philosophy.
Eventually they just want to be objects.

He sat at the desk.
Started a letter to Ana.
The telephone would have been faster.
The letter gave him control.
This should have warned him.
He wrote:
Ana—
Then nothing.
He tried:
There's something I need to tell you.
Too dramatic.
Crossed it out.
I did something stupid.

Too self-forgiving.
Crossed out.
At a party a few weeks ago, I kissed someone.
There.
Fact.
His hand stopped.
He wanted to add:
We weren't clear about us.
I was confused.
It didn't mean anything.
I missed you.
I love you.
I was drinking.
He had not been very drunk.
Bad witness.
He wanted context.
Context gathered at the margins like lawyers outside a courtroom.
He wrote none of it.
Not yet.

He read the sentence again.
It looked small.
One line.
The actual event had lasted perhaps minutes.
The concealment had lasted weeks.
Interesting ratio.

He folded the page.
Did not finish the letter.
Placed it inside the notebook.
He would finish tomorrow.
Maybe send it.
Maybe call.
Maybe decide the confession would only hurt her.

Maybe discover a more sophisticated explanation.
He had options.
He always had options.
That was becoming part of the problem.

Outside, someone shouted across the quad.
A door slammed.
Music traveled badly through a wall.
Somewhere on campus, hundreds of young people were becoming new versions of themselves in rooms where nobody knew the originals.
Most would call this growing up.
Some of it was.
Some of it was costume.
Some of it was lying.
Some of it was finally telling truths that home had never made room for.
Usually, irritatingly, it was several of these at once.

The protagonist lay down without changing clothes.
The letter remained inside the notebook.
One honest sentence folded among hundreds of theories.
In the morning, it would still be there.
Whether he would do anything with it was another matter.
He was beginning to understand the distance between knowing and doing.
He was not yet especially good at crossing it.

Chapter 13

“The Version That Survives”

He finished the letter three days later.
This was not because the letter required three days.
It required perhaps twelve minutes.
The remaining time belonged to cowardice, revision, and the creative use of homework.
He carried the unfinished confession inside his notebook while attending classes, practice, meals, conversations, and one very long lecture on political obligation during which he became increasingly aware that a government could apparently demand military service from a citizen while he remained unable to mail a piece of paper to a girl in the Bronx.
The comparison was unfair.
He made it anyway.

On the first night he added:
I don't want you to think it meant more than it did.
Then crossed it out.
He had no authority over what it meant to her.
This was irritating.
The next night:
I was confused about us.
He left that for almost an hour.
Then crossed out about us.
Wrote:

I was confused about what I wanted.
Better.
Worse.
The sentence had moved the confusion to its proper address.
He stared at it for a while.
Then crossed out the entire paragraph.
Not because it was false.
Because every additional sentence seemed to move him slightly farther from the only fact Ana had not been allowed to know.
He had kissed someone else.
Everything after that wanted a job.

Eventually the letter read:
Ana,
At a party a few weeks ago, I kissed someone. I should have told you when I came home. I didn't. I'm sorry for both.
He stopped.
Four sentences.
No theory.
He felt naked.
He added:
You don't have to answer right away.
This sounded mature.
He distrusted it.
Kept it.
Then signed his name.
We will not print the name here.
Perhaps this is coyness.
Perhaps privacy.
Perhaps the author has reasons.
Perhaps the narrator is enjoying the withholding more than he should.
Everybody gets a little power and starts behaving suspiciously.

He walked to a mailbox.
This mattered.
Not because mailboxes are inherently dramatic.
Because there are moments when the body must carry the mind past its preferred escape route.
The letter was in his jacket.
He could feel it.
He passed one mailbox.
Not this one.
No reason.
The next.
Too many people nearby.
Ridiculous.
He walked another block.
The third stood near a drugstore.
No audience.
He pulled the letter out.
Looked at Ana's address.
His handwriting seemed more incriminating outside the dorm.
He opened the metal door.
Stopped.
A person can become very philosophical while holding a stamped envelope over irreversible space.
Was confession always moral?
What if telling relieved his guilt by transferring pain to her?
What if keeping quiet spared her?
What if honesty was selfish?
Excellent.
Very sophisticated.
He almost admired the argument.
Then recognized its source.
The same legal department had represented him after the kiss.

He dropped the letter.
The metal door closed.
No trumpet.
No absolution.
The United States Postal Service took custody of his character.

For the next two days he regretted mailing it.
Then regretted regretting it.
Then wondered whether the regret proved he had mailed it for the wrong reasons.
Then decided motives could be mixed.
Then accused himself of using mixed motives as an escape.
It was exhausting being seventeen with access to paper.

Ana received the letter on a Thursday.
He knew because she called Thursday night.
Peter was in the room.
The phone rang.
Peter answered.
"Hello?"
Pause.
Then he turned toward the protagonist.
"It's for you."
Something in Peter's face told him nothing.
This felt inconsiderate.
The protagonist took the receiver.
"Hello?"
"Hi."
Ana.
His stomach changed.
"Hey."
Peter looked at him.
The protagonist pointed toward the hallway.
Peter rolled his eyes, gathered his book, and left.

Friendship occasionally means accepting banishment without requiring explanation.
The door closed.

Ana said:
"I got your letter."
"I figured."
Excellent opening.
She was quiet.
He could hear household sounds behind her.
Television.
Someone moving around.
A door.
Home existing around catastrophe.
He missed it.
Then immediately remembered the current problem.

"Why'd you write it?"
He had prepared for anger.
Not this.
"What do you mean?"
"Why didn't you call?"
"I thought it'd be easier."
"For who?"
There.
He looked at the wall.
"Me."
Ana said nothing.
This was probably the correct answer.
He hated it.

"Did you like her?"
He had also prepared for this.
His preparation vanished.
"I don't know."

"Did you want to kiss her?"
"Yeah."
The word hurt.
Good.
Not good morally.
Good because it was the word.
Ana inhaled.
He could hear it.
He wanted to repair immediately.
"It didn't—"
He stopped.
Didn't mean anything.
He had almost said it.
That sentence was waiting in every cheap story about betrayal.
Sometimes true.
Still cheap.

Ana said:
"You were home after."
"Yeah."
"You saw me."
"Yeah."
"You kissed me."
He closed his eyes.
"Yeah."
"And didn't tell me."
"No."
"Why?"
He had been trying to answer that for weeks.
All his writing.
All his philosophy.
All his clever shit.
The answer was not improved by any of it.
"I was scared."

Ana laughed once.
Not amused.
"Of me?"
"Of losing you."
"So you lied."
"I didn't exactly—"
He stopped.
Too late.
The defense had escaped.
Ana heard it.
"You didn't exactly what?"
"Nothing."
"No. Say it."
He sat down on the edge of the bed.
"I didn't tell you."
"Right."
"I know."
"That's lying."
"Yeah."
No argument.
This was new.
It did not help.

She asked:
"Did you sleep with her?"
"No."
"Anything else?"
"No."
"Anyone else?"
"No."
He answered quickly.
Truth sometimes has the same rhythm as lying.
There is no reliable acoustics.

Ana was quiet.

Then:
"I don't know if I believe you."
This injured him.
Immediately.
Even though he had created the injury.
"That's the truth."
"I don't know."
"What do you mean you don't know?"
"I mean I don't know."
"But I'm telling you."
She exhaled.
"You tell things."
The sentence was quiet.
That made it worse.
"What does that mean?"
"You know what it means."
He did.
California.
The stories.
Facts adjusted to rooms.
Technical truths.
His amusement when strangers believed.
His insistence that little lies did not matter because they had no purpose.
Apparently lies did not require purpose to accumulate interest.
He could feel years arriving at once.

"Those are different."
Ana said nothing.
"They are."
"Okay."
"Don't say okay."
She almost laughed.
Almost.

Then:
"How are they different?"
He began.
Stopped.
The answer required him to explain categories of dishonesty to someone deciding whether to trust him.
This seemed strategically unwise.
"They just are."
"That's not an answer."
"I know."

He felt anger begin.
Not because Ana was wrong.
Because he could not force her to separate the version of him that lied for entertainment from the version that had lied through silence about her.
He had spent years insisting that context mattered.
Now he wanted context abolished.

"I never lied to you about anything like this before."
"How would I know?"
There it was.
The cost.
Not punishment.
Not yelling.
Uncertainty.
He had altered her access to reality.
Now his assurance had less purchasing power.
This offended some deep part of him that believed sincerity in the present should restore credit damaged in the past.
It did not.

"I'm telling you everything."
"Now."
"Yes, now."

"Because you felt guilty."
He paused.
"Partly."
"Partly?"
"Because you deserved to know."
"Did I deserve to know before?"
"Yes."
"Okay."
That okay was not weaponized.
It was tired.
He preferred the weapon.

They stayed on the phone for almost an hour.
No dramatic breakup.
No reconciliation.
Human relationships often refuse the narrative convenience of one decisive sentence.
Ana cried some.
He became quiet.
He cried too, once, but silently enough that he later considered not counting it.
This is not how crying works.
He apologized.
More than once.
The later apologies became worse.
Repetition began sounding like pressure.
At one point Ana said:
"Stop saying you're sorry."
He felt wounded by this.
Imagine.

Near the end she said:
"I need time."
He hated the phrase.
Time meant no control.

No argument.
No action.
Waiting again.
Admissions letters.
Mailboxes.
Other people deciding things beyond his reach.
"How much?"
Ana laughed through what remained of crying.
"I don't know."
He nearly asked:
Are we still together?
The question rose to his mouth.
He stopped.
For once he understood that his need for a category was not the urgent thing.
"Okay."
His own okay.
Small.
Real.

They hung up.
He remained seated.
The receiver in his hand continued making its dead sound until he returned it.
Peter came back ten minutes later.
He opened the door carefully.
"You good?"
"No."
Peter nodded.
"Want me to leave?"
"No."
He put his book down.
Sat at his desk.
Did not ask.
The protagonist appreciated him for this.

Then, after several minutes, resented that he had not asked.
Human beings are unreasonable even when wounded by causes they personally manufactured.

Finally Peter said:
"You want to get food?"
The protagonist looked at the clock.
It was late.
"Dining hall's closed."
"There's a place off campus."
The protagonist had no appetite.
"Yeah."
They went.
Sometimes care looks like french fries at an hour when nobody needs french fries.

Peter did not ask what happened until they were halfway through eating.
Then:
"Ana?"
The protagonist nodded.
"What'd you do?"
This was an interesting assumption.
Correct.
Still interesting.
"I kissed somebody."
Peter waited.
"Here?"
"Yeah."
"Did Ana know?"
"No."
"Now she does."
"Yeah."
Peter ate a fry.
No lecture.

The protagonist wanted one.
A lecture would organize guilt.
"What?"
Peter looked at him.
"What what?"
"Say it."
"Say what?"
"Whatever you're thinking."
Peter shrugged.
"You fucked up."
There.
Simple.
His father would have approved.

"I know."
"Okay."
Another okay.
The word was following him across institutions.
"What am I supposed to do?"
Peter looked genuinely confused.
"About Ana?"
"Yeah."
"I don't know."
"That's helpful."
"You want me to lie?"
The protagonist looked down.
Fair.
Peter continued eating.
After a moment:
"Maybe nothing."
"What do you mean nothing?"
"Maybe she decides."
The protagonist hated this so much that he knew it was probably relevant.

On the walk back, Peter said:
"You know, I thought you were full of shit when I met you."
The protagonist laughed despite himself.
"Thanks."
"No, listen."
"Strong opening."
"I thought the Bronx thing was like your whole personality."
The protagonist stopped laughing.
Peter continued.
"Then I realized you think everybody else has a whole personality too."
"What the fuck does that mean?"
"You decide what people are fast."
This was an accusation the protagonist considered himself highly qualified to make about others.
He did not enjoy receiving it.

"Like what?"
"My family."
"What about them?"
"You thought we were rich assholes."
"I never said assholes."
"You didn't have to."
The protagonist thought about the house.
The towels.
The refrigerator.
Peter's father.
His mother.
The silence.
"I didn't think you were assholes."
"Not after."
Peter smiled.
"Before."
The protagonist said nothing.

"Marcus too," Peter said.
"What about Marcus?"
"You thought because he's from Brooklyn he'd automatically understand everything about you."
"I didn't."
Peter looked at him.
"Okay."
"Stop fucking saying okay."
Peter laughed.
The protagonist laughed too.
Against his will.

Then Peter said:
"Maybe Ana doesn't know which version is the version."
The protagonist stopped walking.
Peter kept going for several steps, noticed, turned.
"What?"
The protagonist stared.
"That's some Manny shit."
"Who's Manny?"
"Exactly."
He caught up.

That sentence followed him.
Which version is the version.
He rejected the premise.
All of them were versions.
That did not make any fake.
Different rooms revealed different parts.
Language changed.
Posture changed.
Vocabulary changed.
People were contextual.
He knew this.
He had written it.

He believed it.
Still.
But a problem remained.
Context could reveal different truths.
It could also provide convenient places to store different lies.
The border was not marked.

Ana did not call for six days.
Six days is not long unless someone is deciding whether to love you during them.
Then six days becomes geological.
He went to class.
Baseball.
Library.
Meals.
His life continued.
This felt insulting.
He wanted consequences to stop time.
Instead he had a quiz.

At practice he played badly.
Not catastrophically.
Distracted.
The coach noticed.
"You here?"
"Yeah."
"Then be here."
The protagonist nodded.
Simple coaching.
He had thoughts.
Ana.
Guilt.
Trust.
Identity.
Possible breakup.

The ball was hit.
He reacted late.
It passed him.
The coach said nothing.
That was worse.

Next ball.
He fielded it.
Threw.
Moved.
Again.
Again.
Baseball did not care what kind of person he was.
For two hours this became mercy.

After practice, Marcus sat beside him while they changed shoes.
"You all right?"
"Yeah."
Marcus looked over.
The protagonist laughed.
"No."
"Girl?"
"How does everybody know?"
"You look stupid."
"I always look stupid."
"Different stupid."
The protagonist told him.
Not all details.
Enough.
Marcus listened.
Then:
"You tell her?"
"Yeah."
"Good."

The protagonist looked at him.
"Good?"
"Better than not telling her."
"She might break up with me."
Marcus shrugged.
"So?"
The protagonist stared.
"So?"
"You telling her wasn't supposed to stop that."
Everybody had apparently joined the same conspiracy.

"Why does everybody have simple answers except me?"
Marcus smiled.
"Because you turn answers into homework."
The protagonist threw a sock at him.
Marcus ducked.

Ana called on the seventh day.
He was not in the room.
Peter took the message.
This created a new agony.
"She say anything?"
"Call her."
"What was her voice like?"
Peter looked at him.
"What?"
"Was she mad?"
"I don't know."
"Sad?"
"I don't know."
"Normal?"
"I talked to her for eight seconds."
"You couldn't tell?"
Peter stared.
"You need help."

He called.
Ana answered.
"Hi."
"Hey."
Again.
They had apparently lost all vocabulary.

She said:
"I don't want to break up."
Relief flooded him so quickly it almost became gratitude to himself.
He caught this.
Barely.
"I don't either."
"But I don't trust you the same."
The relief stopped.
There it was.
Not reset.
Continuation with damage.
Real life was expensive.

"I understand."
"Do you?"
He almost said yes.
Paused.
"I'm trying to."
Better.
Ana noticed the difference.
Maybe.
We should not assign every silence meaning.
The narrator is becoming too comfortable in other people's rooms.

They agreed to continue.

No rules drafted.
No romantic summit.
They would talk.
Visit.
See.
Seventeen-year-olds pretending uncertainty was manageable because the alternative was loss.
Sometimes this is called hope.
Sometimes avoidance.
Usually both.

The relationship changed.
Not constantly.
Some days felt exactly the same.
This surprised him.
He had expected betrayal to stain every conversation.
Instead they could laugh.
Talk about school.
Music.
Family.
Then something tiny would happen.
He would say he had been studying with people.
Ana would ask:
"Who?"
The question would be ordinary.
He would hear suspicion.
Maybe it was there.
Maybe he supplied it.
He would become defensive.
She would hear defensiveness.
Now suspicion existed whether or not it had before.
Trust is strange architecture.
Once cracked, people can begin damaging it while inspecting the crack.

He learned not to say:
"You have to trust me."
The first time he said it, Ana answered:
"No, I don't."
This ended that argument efficiently.

Meanwhile college kept expanding.
He met people whose politics made his family sound conservative.
Others made his family sound radical.
People who had been arrested at protests.
People who thought protests were theater.
Students who discussed Marx at lunch and complained when cafeteria workers were slow.
Students who praised working people abstractly and knew none personally.
Students from wealthy families embarrassed by wealth.
Students from wealthy families delighted by it.
Poor students ashamed of being poor.
Poor students who turned poverty into moral superiority.
Middle-class students who called themselves poor because everyone else appeared richer.
Everyone located themselves strategically.
Class, he began to realize, was partly money and partly narration.

In one seminar a student said:
"People vote against their own interests."
The protagonist raised his hand.
Of course.
"How do you know what their interests are?"
The student looked at him.
"Economic interests."
"Why are economic interests automatically more important than everything else?"

"They're material."
"So?"
The professor watched.
The protagonist continued.
"What if somebody cares more about religion? Or crime? Or race? Or abortion? Or whatever?"
"Then they're being manipulated."
He smiled.
There.
A weak seam.
"So if they agree with you, they understand their interests. If they don't, they've been manipulated?"
The room shifted.
The student became irritated.
"That's not what I said."
"It's kind of what you said."
Familiar electricity.
He knew this dance.

Then another student said:
"You're assuming people always understand why they want what they want."
The protagonist turned.
"No, I'm not."
"Aren't you?"
"No."
"Then why treat their stated preference like the final word?"
He stopped.
Excellent.
Annoying.
The professor smiled.
The protagonist saw the trap.
Both sides could become paternalistic.
Both sides could become naïve.
This was exactly the kind of mess he loved.

He entered enthusiastically.
By the end, nobody had won.
He felt wonderful.

After class the professor stopped him.
"You enjoy ambiguity."
The protagonist smiled.
"I guess."
"Be careful."
There it was.
Professors enjoyed turning compliments into warnings.
"Why?"
"Ambiguity can become its own certainty."
He frowned.
"That doesn't make sense."
"It will."
This answer should be illegal in education.

He thought about it for days.
Then decided the professor was probably right without understanding exactly why.
This is one form of education.

At parties he continued trying on identities.
Less now.
Or differently.
The thrill had changed after Ana's sentence.
You tell things.
He could hear it.
The stories no longer felt consequence-free.
Still, temptation remained.
A stranger offered blank space.
Blank space invited design.
And occasionally, blank space invited something much stupider.

There were stories about him he had nearly forgotten.
Or claimed to have forgotten.
These are not necessarily the same thing.
Later he ran into someone who remembered a particular night uptown.
The man looked at him for half a second before smiling.
"Blackie's manager."
The protagonist stared.
Then memory arrived.
"Oh, fuck."
He laughed.
There it was.
A whole night returned in two words.

It had begun at an after-hours bar around 215th Street and Broadway.
Fifteen dollars at the door bought two drink tickets and, apparently, permission to become whoever the evening required.
He had gone with two friends.
Their names do not matter.
They were witnesses.
This was worse.
Inside, the night had reached the hour when sensible people were asleep and everyone still awake had begun to seem more interesting than they probably were.
Music.
Smoke.
Liquor.
Cologne attempting to defeat smoke and liquor.
Men leaning against walls with expressions suggesting extensive commercial interests.

Women moving through the room in groups because women possessed certain practical understandings of nightlife that men frequently mistook for attitude.
The protagonist looked across the room.
Then saw her.
The hottest woman in the place.
This judgment was his, obviously, and young male jurisprudence offered no appeals process.
She stood with three friends.
Beautiful.
Composed.
Watching the room.
The protagonist decided the group gave off what he privately understood as a we only go for drug dealers vibe.
This conclusion rested on no admissible evidence whatsoever.
It was enough.

One of his friends noticed where he was looking.
"No."
The protagonist straightened his shirt.
"What?"
"No."
"I didn't say anything."
"You got that look."
"What look?"
"That stupid fucking look."
The protagonist smiled.
Then walked over.

He did not know what he was going to say.
This was usually when he was most dangerous.
Preparation forced him to confront reality.
Improvisation allowed reality to negotiate.
He introduced himself.

Not entirely accurately.
The woman gave him her name.
They talked.
Five minutes.
Maybe less.
Maybe more.
Memory has been drinking in this story too.
Whatever he said worked well enough that she had not walked away.
This constituted tremendous success.
Then one of his friends appeared beside him.
Urgent.
Leaned toward his ear.
"Yo. Is there another bathroom in here?"
The protagonist looked at him.
His friend's expression suggested his digestive system had withdrawn from diplomatic negotiations.
He nodded.
Then turned back to the woman.
A normal person might have said:
My friend needs a bathroom.
A slightly more dignified person might have said:
Excuse me for a minute.
The protagonist said:
"I gotta go pick up some work."
She looked at him.
"Now?"
"Yeah."
He pointed across the room toward the friend he had arrived with.
"Something came up."
Work.
Something came up.
He had offered two sentences and somehow created organized crime.

The woman nodded.
If anything, she seemed more interested.
This was unfortunate.

The three friends left.
The moment they reached the sidewalk, the friend with the bathroom emergency said:
"What the fuck was that?"
"What?"
"Pick up work?"
The other friend started laughing.
"What work?"
The protagonist shrugged.
"I don't know yet."
There are sentences that should cause friends to confiscate your car keys.
Instead they got into the car.

They drove to a twenty-four-hour diner.
The friend used the bathroom with the urgency that had accidentally launched a criminal enterprise.
They ordered food.
Coffee.
Whatever young men ate in the middle of the night while congratulating themselves for having survived absolutely nothing.
Then they began discussing the woman.
The protagonist explained what he had told her.
His friends laughed.
One asked:
"So what work are we picking up?"
The protagonist stopped eating.
Something happened behind his eyes.
His friends recognized it.
"No."

He stood.
"Where you going?"
"Hold on."
"Why?"
"Just hold on."
He walked out of the diner.

Nearby was a twenty-four-hour bodega.
The protagonist entered.
The man behind the counter watched a young man walk in during the middle of the night with the focused expression of someone about to make either a very good purchase or a terrible decision.
The protagonist scanned the shelves.
There.
Golden Meadow flour.
Five-pound bags.
He bought three.
Fifteen pounds.
Then asked for gallon-size plastic bags.
The man behind the counter looked at the flour.
Looked at the plastic bags.
Then looked through the window toward the diner, where the protagonist's two friends were visibly losing their fucking minds.
He looked back at the protagonist.
The protagonist remained serious.
This may have been the finest performance of the evening.
The man said nothing.
There are moments in retail when curiosity must surrender to employment.

Back at the diner, the bags went onto the table.
Three five-pound bags of flour.
Plastic bags.

His friends stared.
One finally managed:
"No fucking way."
The protagonist sat down.
"What's her name?"
They started laughing again.
"No."
"What's her fucking name?"
He remembered.
Of course he remembered.

They found the bar's telephone number.
This was how things happened.
No text.
No social media.
No location sharing.
No convenient digital trail documenting that three idiots in a diner had just purchased fifteen pounds of baking flour as a prop in an imaginary narcotics transaction.
You called the establishment.
A human being answered.
You asked for another human being.
Sometimes, astonishingly, this worked.
The protagonist called the bar.
Asked for the woman by name.
Waited.
One friend had his face buried in his arms.
The other kept whispering:
"Blackie's manager."
Blackie was an infamous uptown drug dealer.
The protagonist had no managerial relationship with Blackie.
This is important.
No employment relationship.
No consulting arrangement.
No retirement plan.

Nothing.
His friends had nevertheless promoted him.
Blackie's manager.

The woman came to the phone.
"Hello?"
"Hey. It's me."
He apologized for leaving abruptly.
Then lowered his voice.
He had a problem.
Could she do him a favor?
"What?"
He needed somewhere to store something.
"Store what?"
Pause.
Never underestimate the dramatic usefulness of not answering a question.
"Just something."
"For how long?"
"Couple hours."
Another pause.
"I'll give you fifteen hundred."
His friends stopped laughing.
The number had changed the game.
Fifteen hundred dollars.
The protagonist did not have fifteen hundred dollars allocated for temporary flour storage.
This detail apparently belonged to a later stage of planning.
The woman said yes.
Immediately.

This should have been the moment when the protagonist understood he had wandered beyond joke into consequence.
Instead he felt exhilarated.
The story believed him.

That was always the narcotic.
Not deception itself.
The instant when another human being stepped inside the reality he had invented.

The woman left the bar with her friends.
The protagonist and his friends repackaged fifteen pounds of Golden Meadow flour into gallon-size plastic bags.
We should stop briefly.
Not for morality.
For scale.
Fifteen pounds is a substantial amount of flour.
Enough flour to make the evening visually persuasive to people who had apparently never considered that drug dealers might use packaging other than whatever they had seen in movies.
The three men looked at their work.
One friend said:
"We're going to get fucking killed."
They laughed.
This was their risk assessment.

Both groups met at the woman's apartment.
She had her friends with her.
The friends were considerably less impressed.
They looked at the protagonist.
His friends.
The bags.
Then one another.
At least some of them had arrived at the possibility that these men were either full of shit or dangerously stupid.
This was an excellent assessment.
They did not know which.
Neither, perhaps, did the men.
One of the women quietly called a male friend.

The protagonist did not know this at the time.
It was, however, the first genuinely intelligent operational decision anyone had made since the bathroom emergency.

Inside, the protagonist continued being Blackie's manager.
Not by announcing it.
That would have ruined everything.
He simply behaved as though fifteen pounds of narcotics in a stranger's apartment represented a minor logistical inconvenience.
His two friends sat near the bags trying to look like men for whom this was normal.
They failed differently.
One became too quiet.
The other became too relaxed.
This is how amateur cartel members identify themselves.
The women watched.
Nobody asked the obvious question:
What exactly are you people doing?
Perhaps everyone was afraid the answer would make the evening less interesting.

The protagonist and the woman disappeared into the bathroom.
The details are not our business.
He hooked up with her.
That is sufficient.
Somewhere outside the bathroom sat two of his friends guarding fifteen pounds of flour while pretending to be members of an international narcotics organization.
There are philosophers who have spent entire careers trying to explain masculinity.
They could have saved considerable time by visiting that apartment.

When the protagonist emerged, he had apparently decided subtlety was no longer appropriate.
He walked into the room with the composure of a man whose fictional criminal organization had entered a complicated operational phase.
He looked at one of his friends.
"Give it to her."
His friend stared.
The protagonist looked toward the bags.
"All of it."
His friend nearly broke character.
Nearly.
He handed the alleged drugs over.
The protagonist turned to the woman.
"Keep this here."
She nodded.
"We'll be back in an hour."
An hour.
The three friends left.
They made it down the hallway.
Into the elevator.
Out of the building.
They were laughing before they reached the sidewalk.
Not polite laughter.
Collapse.
The kind that bends grown men forward.
One friend could barely breathe.
"Blackie's fucking manager!"
"Shut the fuck up."
"Fifteen pounds of flour!"
"Get in the car."
"You owe her fifteen hundred dollars!"
That made them laugh harder.
The protagonist had not solved this part.
Future management problem.

They got into the car.
Still laughing.
Then headlights moved down the street.
Another car pulled up in front of the building.
The laughter slowed.
Three men got out.
The friends recognized them.
They had been at the after-hours bar.
The men looked toward the building.
Then pulled hoodies over their heads.
And ran inside.
Silence.
Complete.
The three friends sat in the car.
The protagonist watched the building.
Nobody laughed.
For several seconds, the entire architecture of the evening changed.
Fifteen pounds of flour was upstairs.
The women were upstairs.
Three men who believed something about what was upstairs were now running toward it.
The protagonist felt his body understand something his imagination had neglected to model.
Stories did not remain inside the storyteller.
Other people acted on them.

"Drive."
Nobody debated.
The car moved.
Fast.
Not cinematic.
No chase.
No gunfire.

No heroic return.
They left.
This is worth emphasizing.
They left.
Whatever version of themselves they had been performing disappeared the moment actual danger arrived.
Cartel affiliation terminated without notice.
Blackie's manager retired.
His associates accepted severance.

For several blocks nobody spoke.
Then one friend said:
"Yo."
Nothing else.
Just:
"Yo."
The protagonist looked out the window.
Adrenaline.
Fear.
Perhaps shame, although shame tends to arrive after survival confirms availability.
Then the other friend started laughing.
Quietly at first.
The protagonist turned.
"What's funny?"
The friend shook his head.
"Golden Meadow."
That was it.
They collapsed again.
Fear and laughter sharing the same car.
Because human beings are poorly organized internally.

The woman and her friends were fine.
This matters.
The night did not become tragedy.

Whatever confrontation followed did not produce the catastrophe the protagonist had suddenly imagined from the car.
The flour eventually became flour again.
The fifteen hundred dollars remained largely theoretical.
Blackie continued his actual life without knowing he had briefly acquired middle management.
And the protagonist filed the night somewhere among the stories young men tell because surviving stupidity can make stupidity sound like adventure.

Later, when the acquaintance reminded him—
"Blackie's manager."
—the protagonist laughed so hard he had to look away.
Then the man said:
"You know you motherfuckers could've gotten somebody killed."
The laughter changed.
Not disappeared.
Changed.
"Yeah."
The protagonist nodded.
"Yeah."
There was nothing intelligent to add.

Memory had preserved the funniest pieces.
The bathroom emergency.
The diner.
The flour.
The plastic bags.
The bodega clerk watching two men laugh through a window.
Fifteen hundred dollars he had no intention of paying.
His friends pretending to guard narcotics.
Blackie's manager.

Excellent details.
Memory likes excellent details.
They give it something to do while consequences fade around the edges.
The three hooded men were also part of the story.
Easy to forget where to place them.
At the end, perhaps.
Like a warning.
That is how stories improve themselves.

The protagonist had spent years experimenting with identities because he thought masks belonged to the person wearing them.
That night offered evidence otherwise.
Put on a mask convincingly enough and somebody else may behave as though the face underneath is real.
A woman may leave a bar.
Her friends may become afraid.
Someone may make a telephone call.
Three men may pull up outside a building.
A joke may acquire participants who were never told it was a joke.
He understood this now.
Or says he does.
Be careful.
Survival is a talented editor.
A man can remember the lesson while still secretly enjoying the story.
The protagonist certainly did.
So did his friends.
So, regrettably, does the narrator.
That may be the more useful evidence.
Anyway.
Back at college, he was still lying about summer jobs.

One night he met a woman named Claire.
She was older.
Twenty-one.
This seemed ancient.
She had transferred from another college, wore black almost exclusively, and spoke as though boredom were something other people had inflicted upon her personally.
He was fascinated immediately.
She asked:
"What are you?"
He laughed.
"What does that mean?"
"Major."
"Oh."
"I thought you were asking existentially."
"I wasn't."
"Undecided."
"That's boring."
He liked her instantly.

"What are you?"
"Art history."
"Of course."
"What does that mean?"
"Nothing."
She smiled.
"You're from New York."
"Bronx."
She nodded as if this confirmed something.
He hated when people did that.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"No, what?"
"You have that thing."
"What thing?"

"Like you're waiting for somebody to underestimate you."
He stared.
He wanted to dislike her.
Couldn't yet.

"Maybe people do."
"Probably."
"Then?"
"Then what?"
"You said it like it's a problem."
"I said it like you're waiting."
He had no answer.
Claire drank.
Then asked:
"You really play baseball?"
"Yeah."
"That's strange."
"Why?"
"You don't look like a baseball player."
"What does a baseball player look like?"
She smiled.
He recognized that smile.
He had become predictable.
"See?"
"What?"
"You're always ready."
"For what?"
"The trial."
Jerome.
Ana.
Teachers.
Peter.
Now Claire.
Apparently the prosecution had become visible from space.

He spent half the night talking to her.
Nothing physical.
He was careful.
Not only because of Ana.
Because Claire's attention felt like being examined by someone who might enjoy the dissection.
He liked that too much.

She asked about his writing.
He showed her nothing.
Good instinct.
Instead he described it.
Observation.
Contradiction.
People lying to themselves.
Class.
Identity.
She listened.
Then said:
"You sound like you think contradiction is automatically profound."
He disliked her immediately.
There.
Finally.

"What does that mean?"
"It means sometimes people are inconsistent because they're stupid."
He laughed.
"I know."
"Sometimes somebody says two opposite things because they haven't thought either one through."
"I know."
"Sometimes hypocrisy is just hypocrisy."
"I know."

"Then why are you smiling?"
"Because you're telling me things I already think."
Claire looked at him.
"Then why do you need me to know you already think them?"
He stopped.
She smiled.
Checkmate.
He hated her again.
More respectfully.

Walking back to the dorm, he felt energized.
Not attracted exactly.
Also attracted.
Intellectually irritated.
Sexually curious.
Morally cautious.
This was becoming a crowded hallway.
He told himself the conversation meant nothing.
Then remembered how dangerous that phrase had become.
Fine.
It meant something.
Not necessarily something he needed to act on.
This distinction felt adult.
He was very proud of it.
That should concern us.

He called Ana the next day.
Told her about the party.
Not Claire specifically at first.
Then did.
Why?
Maybe transparency.
Maybe self-testing.
Maybe he wanted credit for telling her.

Maybe he wanted to provoke jealousy to reassure himself she still cared.
Motives do not arrive wearing name tags.
He said:
"I was talking to this girl who's into art."
Ana paused.
"Oh."
He heard the pause.
Immediately he felt powerful.
Then ashamed.
There.
Ugly little thing.

"Just talking," he said.
"I didn't ask."
"I know."
"Then why'd you say just talking?"
He looked at the telephone.
Objects sometimes become hostile through proximity.
"Because I knew what you were thinking."
"You don't know what I was thinking."
"Okay."
"Now you're doing it."
"What?"
"That okay."
He laughed.
She did too.
Some injuries heal enough to become jokes before they become scars.

They talked longer.
He told her Claire had challenged his writing ideas.
Ana said:
"I like her."
"You haven't met her."

"Anybody making your life difficult has my support."
"Fuck you."
There.
Familiarity.
He loved her.
The fact remained complicated by everything else.
Love did not solve character.
Another false advertisement.

The semester moved toward winter.
He began working harder academically.
Not transformed.
More deliberate.
There is a difference between discipline and a temporary panic about consequences.
He experienced both.
Sometimes he studied because he wanted to understand.
Sometimes because grades mattered.
Sometimes because fear of disappointing his parents entered the library wearing his face.
Sometimes because Peter was studying and competition is a vulgar but effective tutor.

He did well in some classes.
Average in another.
The average grade offended him most because he thought the class was easy.
He went to the professor.
Not angrily.
Initially.

"I don't understand the grade."
The professor pulled out the paper.
"You make several interesting points."
The protagonist nodded.

"But you're responding to the argument you wish the author made."
He frowned.
"I cite the text."
"Yes."
The professor pointed.
"Here. Here. And here."
"Right."
"You're selecting the parts that support the argument you want to have."
The protagonist went still.
The professor continued.
"You barely engage the strongest evidence against your reading."
"I disagree with it."
"That's precisely when you need to engage it."
There.
He felt accused in a language he respected.

"I did."
"You mentioned it."
"What's the difference?"
"Engaging an argument means allowing it to be strong before you answer it."
He did not like this at all.
"Why would I make the other side stronger?"
The professor smiled.
"Because otherwise you're arguing with someone who isn't there."
The protagonist thought about his notebooks.
His clippings.
Articles folded inward.
Arguments won against weaker versions.
People categorized before speaking.

And perhaps, somewhere farther back, fifteen pounds of Golden Meadow flour that had briefly become narcotics because enough people had agreed to behave as though it were.
He became irritated.
Mostly because this sounded transferable.

The professor leaned back.
"You're bright."
The protagonist liked this.
"But you use intelligence defensively."
He liked this less.
"What does that mean?"
"You seem more interested in not being wrong than in finding out if you are."
Silence.
He could feel an answer forming.
A strong one.
Of course.
He did not give it.

The professor waited.
Then:
"That's better."
The protagonist laughed despite himself.
"Fuck."
The professor raised an eyebrow.
"Sorry."
"No, that's probably the appropriate scholarly response."

He left with the paper.
The grade did not change.
This felt important.
He had gone seeking correction of the outcome.
Received correction of himself.

Terrible customer service.

That night he reread the paper.
The professor was right.
Not completely.
The protagonist was careful to preserve this.
But enough.
He found the opposing passage.
Read it slowly.
For the first time, not as a target.
He tried to state its argument in a way its author would recognize.
This was harder.
The argument became better.
He felt something close to betrayal.
His own side now had more work to do.

He wrote in the margin:
DON'T BEAT THE DUMBEST VERSION OF THE OTHER SIDE.
Then below:
THAT PROVES NOTHING EXCEPT YOU CAN FIND DUMB PEOPLE.
Then:
DUMB PEOPLE ARE NOT RARE ENOUGH TO BE EVIDENCE.
He laughed.
That one would survive.

He thought about politics.
Race.
Class.
His father.
Peter's father.
Ana.

Claire.
The student in seminar.
How often had he selected the weakest version because victory was cleaner there?
How often had he called someone ignorant after refusing to hear the strongest thing they could have meant?
How often had other people done the same to him?
There.
Immediately he redistributed the indictment.
Of course.
Still.
He caught it.

He wrote:
IF YOU CAN'T EXPLAIN THE OTHER PERSON'S ARGUMENT IN A WAY THEY WOULD ACCEPT, YOU MAY NOT BE ARGUING WITH THEM YET.
This sounded mature.
He admired it.
Then underneath:
I WILL PROBABLY USE THIS TO FEEL SUPERIOR TO PEOPLE WHO DON'T DO IT.
He laughed so loudly Peter looked over.
"What?"
"Nothing."
Peter returned to reading.
The protagonist wanted to show him.
Didn't.
Not every realization required an audience.
This was new enough to document.
He did not document it.
Better.

Winter break approached.
Home again.

Ana again.
Manny.
Family.
Old rooms.
He felt excited.
Also uneasy.
Every return now contained measurement.
Had he changed?
Would they notice?
Did he want them to?
Was changing good?
How much?
Which parts?
Identity had become a house where every room contained another door.
He was beginning to miss the days when being from California solved the problem.

Before leaving campus, he saw Claire once more.
She asked:
"You survive the semester?"
"Barely."
"Drama."
"Accurate drama."
She smiled.
"Going home?"
"Yeah."
"The Bronx."
"Still."
"Do you become a different person there?"
He looked at her.
The question seemed casual.
Maybe it was.
He felt something deeper because he had been thinking about it.

We should not blame Claire for timing.

"No."
Then:
"Kind of."
She smiled.
"Which?"
"Both."
She rolled her eyes.
"Your favorite answer."
He laughed.
"Different parts get louder."
Claire considered this.
"That's better."
He felt absurdly pleased.
"Better than what?"
"Both."
"Both is still true."
"Maybe."
He smiled.
Now everybody was stealing his words.

She turned to leave.
Then:
"Try not to narrate yourself all break."
He stared.
"What does that mean?"
Claire kept walking.
He almost followed to ask.
Did not.
For approximately thirty seconds.
Then he shouted:
"That's a bullshit thing to say and walk away!"
She turned, walking backward.
"Exactly!"

He laughed.

On the bus home, he sat by the window.
Notebook in his bag.
He did not open it.
For the first hour.
He watched.
Road.
Cars.
Buildings changing.
People entering and leaving landscapes without knowing he was thinking about them.
The closer he got to the city, the more familiar everything became.
He tried not to narrate himself.
Failed almost immediately.
Returning.
Too literary.
He stopped.
Going home.
Better.

Then he noticed something.
He had called college home twice that week.
Accidentally.
"I'm going home after practice."
Meaning the dorm.
Now he was going home.
Meaning the Bronx.
Two homes.
Same word.
No crisis.
Language had solved the contradiction by refusing to care.
He smiled.
Did not write it down.

When he arrived, his mother hugged him.
His father took one bag.
His brother inspected his clothes for evidence of corruption.
Manny came by later.
Ana the next day.
Nothing had waited exactly as he left it.
Everything felt familiar.
This time he did not resent that.
Much.

Ana and he walked.
Cold enough to see breath.
They talked about the semester.
Her life.
His.
The kiss remained between them without occupying every sentence.
At one point she took his hand.
The protagonist felt something loosen.
Not absolution.
Not restoration.
Continuity.
That was different.

He said:
"You trust me?"
He regretted it immediately.
Ana looked at him.
"More than I did."
Not yes.
Not no.
A measurement.
He accepted it.
This, perhaps, was progress.

Then he asked:
"How much more?"
Ana laughed and let go of his hand.
"See?"
He laughed too.
"Sorry."
She took it again.

They passed a store window.
His reflection moved beside hers.
For a second he saw himself without preparation.
College sweatshirt.
Different haircut.
Same walk, mostly.
Same face.
Different posture?
Maybe.
He could not tell.
He wondered which version Ana saw.
Then which version Manny saw.
His mother.
Peter.
Marcus.
Claire.
Professors.
Strangers.
The woman uptown who had once believed he managed fifteen pounds of narcotics.
Himself.
The question began expanding.
He stopped it.
Or tried.

Ana said:
"What?"

"Nothing."
She looked at him.
He smiled.
Then changed the answer.
"I was wondering if I'm different."
"Of course you're different."
That quick.
He felt a small panic.
"Bad?"
She looked at him.
"There you go."
"What?"
"You always turn change into better or worse."
"What else is there?"
"Different."
He hated when words refused promotion.

"Am I?"
"Yeah."
"How?"
Ana thought.
This mattered to him too much.
Finally:
"You listen a little longer."
He stared.
That was not the answer he expected.
"That's it?"
She laughed.
"You want a report?"
"No."
"You're still annoying."
"Good."
"And you say 'I don't know' more."
He smiled.
"That's good."

"Sometimes."
"What do you mean sometimes?"
Ana looked at him.
He heard himself.
"Fuck."
They laughed.

Then she said:
"You also sound more like yourself."
This confused him completely.
"How?"
"I don't know."
"That's not fair."
"See? I'm learning."

He wanted to ask what himself sounded like.
Did not.
Maybe because he feared the answer.
Maybe because he understood there was no useful answer.
Maybe because she squeezed his hand and for once that was enough.
Let's choose none.
The temptation to explain every silence is exactly the disease the boy has been developing.
The narrator should know better.
Whether he does remains uncertain.

That night the protagonist returned to his old room.
Opened the notebook.
Read the sentence from months earlier:
I'M NOT LEAVING AS ONE PERSON.
He remembered writing it.
At the time it had felt profound.
Now it felt incomplete.
He took out a pen.

Almost added something.
Stopped.
Claire's voice:
Try not to narrate yourself all break.
He laughed.
Closed the notebook.
Turned off the light.
Lay down.
For several minutes he did nothing except listen to the apartment.
Pipes.
Television.
His mother somewhere.
His father coughing.
His brother moving around.
A car horn outside.
Somebody laughing on the sidewalk.
Life without interpretation.
Or as close as he could get.
He lasted perhaps a minute and a half before thinking:
This is life without interpretation.
He opened his eyes.
"Jesus fucking Christ."
From the other room his mother shouted:
"What?"
"Nothing!"
There it was.
Same word.
Different truth.
He smiled in the dark.

Chapter 14

“The Door”

By eighteen, he had learned that certain doors opened differently depending on how badly you looked like you needed them to.
This was not philosophy.
It was New York.
A restaurant door.
A classroom door.
A bedroom door.
The door to somebody's apartment when their parents were home.
The door to somebody's apartment when their parents were not.
And then there were club doors.
Club doors had priests.
Doormen.
Promoters.
Men with lists.
Men pretending to have lists.
Men who knew somebody who knew somebody whose entire authority consisted of standing beside a velvet rope with a pen.
The protagonist admired this system because it was absurd, corrupt, theatrical, and remarkably effective.
Naturally, he believed he understood it.

He was home from college for the summer.

This had created a new problem.
At school he had become the Bronx kid.
In the Bronx he was now the college kid.
Neither description was inaccurate.
Both annoyed him.
He had returned wearing one shirt his mother claimed looked expensive, although it was not, using two words Manny insisted nobody in the neighborhood had ever heard him say before, and carrying the dangerous conviction that nine months away had not changed him at all.
Manny gave this approximately four hours.
Then:
"You say 'actually' too much now."
"I always said actually."
"No."
"Actually, I did."
Manny looked at him.
"See?"
The protagonist told him to go fuck himself.
Accent restored.

The night began with a plan that wasn't much of one.
Limelight.
Manhattan.
Late.
A friend of a friend knew someone.
This, as usual, constituted infrastructure.
There would be four of them.
Then three.
Then Manny said he might meet them there.
Then somebody else said Manny was already coming.
Nobody called to confirm because nobody could call anyone who was already outside.
This is difficult to explain to people born into perpetual reachability.

Plans were not coordinates shared on a screen.
Plans were vows.
Meet at the corner.
Eleven-thirty.
If you're late, we wait.
If you're very late, we insult you.
If you're impossibly late, we assume either death or disrespect.
Sometimes correctly.

The protagonist spent too long getting dressed.
He would have denied this.
He changed shirts three times.
The first made him look too young.
The second looked like he was trying not to look young.
The third looked expensive enough to suggest that if he was trying, he had at least received professional guidance.
He wore the third.
His mother saw him near the door.
"Where are you going?"
"Downtown."
"Where downtown?"
"Just downtown."
"Downtown where?"
"With Manny."
This was not the answer.
It was evidence of supervision transfer.
His mother folded her arms.
"What place?"
He told her.
She looked at him.
"Isn't that a club?"
"Kind of."
"What does kind of mean?"

He almost explained that Limelight occupied a deconsecrated church, which would have made the answer both more accurate and significantly worse.
Instead:
"It's a place."
His mother stared.
Then:
"Be careful."
"Always."
She continued staring.
He smiled.
"Usually."
Better.

His father was watching television.
"Don't drink and drive."
"We're taking the train."
"Good."
Then, without looking away from the screen:
"And don't get into some stupid shit because your friends are doing it."
The protagonist paused.
This advice had arrived suspiciously late.
"Why are you looking at me when you say that?"
His father finally turned.
"I'm not."
"You literally just did."
"Go."
The protagonist left laughing.

The subway downtown changed them before the club had a chance.
This happened to everyone.
On the platform they were neighborhood boys.
On the train they began editing.

Posture.
Volume.
Jackets.
How loudly they laughed.
By Fourteenth Street, one friend had become quieter.
Another louder.
The protagonist became observant.
This was his preferred disguise for nervousness.
He watched the people getting on.
Black kids dressed downtown.
White kids dressed uptown pretending downtown.
Latino kids dressed like they had refused the question.
Women in black.
Men in leather.
People with hair requiring commitment.
People who looked rich.
People who looked like rich people trying to look poor.
People who looked poor and had somehow spent more on their boots than his father spent on groceries in a week.
He loved all of it.
He distrusted all of it.
Naturally he wanted entry.

When they reached the club, the line was already long.
He would later say it wrapped around the block.
It may have been thirty people.
Memory hires extras.
Limelight rose above them with the confidence of a building that had already survived religion.
It had once been a church.
This will undoubtedly mean something to somebody.
To him it meant the ceiling was high and the girls looked good.

Manny appeared twenty minutes later.

"Thought you said eleven-thirty."
"It is eleven-thirty."
"It's almost twelve."
"Same thing."
"It is literally not the same thing."
The protagonist smiled.
College had apparently taught Manny precision by osmosis.

The problem arrived at the door.
Two of the group had identification that might survive casual inspection.
One had none.
Manny had something that had belonged, according to legend, to somebody's cousin.
The photograph resembled him in the broad constitutional sense that both were male.
The protagonist's own borrowed identification was better.
Not good.
Better.
He had practiced the birthday.
Address.
Sign.
The art of lying improves dramatically when bureaucracy provides questions in advance.

They moved toward the front.
The protagonist could feel his body becoming less interested in oxygen.
The doorman looked at the first friend.
Then the second.
Then Manny.
Held the card.
Looked at Manny.
Back to the card.
Then:

"No."
Manny smiled.
"What?"
"No."
"It's me."
The doorman looked again.
"It is absolutely not you."
People behind them laughed.
Not cruelly.
Enough.
Manny's face changed.
The protagonist saw it.
A joke until it becomes public.
Then dignity enters.

The protagonist stepped forward.
"He's with us."
The doorman looked at him.
This was the first mistake.
He had volunteered.
The man took his identification.
Looked at it.
Looked at the protagonist.
Then back.
"How old are you?"
The protagonist gave the age.
No hesitation.
"Birthday?"
He gave it.
"Address?"
Correct.
The doorman studied him longer.
Then waved him through.
Just him.
The protagonist stood on the other side of the rope.

Manny remained outside.

"Hold up," the protagonist said.
The doorman had already moved on.
"Manny."
Manny shrugged.
"It's fine."
"It ain't fine."
One of the other friends had gotten through too.
Another was still arguing.
The line pressed.
The door had its own metabolism.
The protagonist leaned back toward Manny.
"I'll come out."
Manny nodded.
"Go."
"No, I'm serious. I'll come back out."
"Go."
"You sure?"
Manny looked at him.
"Yeah."
A reasonable person might notice that this answer did not mean what it said.
The protagonist, who had spent years explaining that language was context, selected the interpretation he preferred.
He went inside.

The sound hit first.
Then heat.
Then light arranged not to illuminate but to persuade.
The inside of the old church seemed larger than the outside world had any right to contain.
Bodies moved under stained glass.
Smoke hung where prayers presumably used to.

Somewhere overhead, architecture reached toward God while downstairs everybody was trying to get laid.
Civilization.

For the first ten minutes, he thought about Manny constantly.
Then every few minutes.
Then occasionally.
Then only when something reminded him.
This is how betrayal usually works.
Not with a decision.
With competing stimuli.

The friend who had gotten in with him disappeared almost immediately.
Someone knew someone.
A hand waved.
A woman appeared.
The protagonist was alone.
This should have increased his loyalty.
Instead it increased his freedom.
Nobody inside knew him.
Again.
Blank space.
His favorite drug.

He moved through the crowd.
Not dancing yet.
Watching.
There were people older than him by enough years to seem professionally adult.
Twenty-two.
Twenty-five.
Maybe thirty.

Men who looked like they worked in finance and wanted no witnesses.
Women who seemed to have been born knowing where coat check was.
A cluster of art-school-looking people who could probably smell conventional employment.
Downtown kids.
Uptown kids.
People from Brooklyn.
Queens.
Jersey.
Maybe Europe.
Maybe Staten Island, though they would probably deny it for the evening.
He could hear pieces of conversation.
Gallery.
Record label.
Real estate.
Cocaine.
Internship.
Somebody named Marco.
Somebody who knew Basquiat or knew someone who knew Basquiat or had once stood near a wall that Basquiat might have looked at.
New York social currency moved heavily through proximity.
The protagonist understood this system because he had already mastered its amateur version.
My cousin knows.
My boy knows.
I was with.
I almost went.
Same market.
Better tailoring.

A woman bumped into him.

Turned.
"Sorry."
He smiled.
"It's all right."
She looked at him for one second longer than necessary.
Or he later decided she had.
She was older.
Maybe twenty-three.
Maybe twenty-eight.
At eighteen, adult women existed in broad geological periods.
She wore black.
Of course.
Almost everybody in the club wore black except people confident enough not to.
She asked:
"You alone?"
"Right now."
Correct.
"What does that mean?"
"My friends are around."
Incorrect enough to be interesting.
She smiled.
"You're young."
There.
Problem.
He laughed.
"So are you."
"That's not an answer."
"What was the question?"
She laughed.
Good.

Her name was Elise.
Or Lisa.

Or Elisa.
The protagonist would later insist Elise.
The narrator was not there.
Do with that what you will.
She said she worked for an architecture firm.
This created a difficulty.
Because the protagonist, for reasons known only to the small committee inside him responsible for unnecessary escalation, said:
"No shit. I'm studying architecture."
There.
Old mask.
Returned from storage.

"Where?"
He named a school.
Not his school.
A school where architecture would have been plausible.
She looked at him.
"What year?"
"Second."
He was eighteen.
This required mathematical compression but remained technically possible if no one respected calendars.
"What do you like?"
"About architecture?"
She smiled.
"Usually when someone says they study architecture, that's what I mean."
He laughed.
Needed time.
Looked around.
Then said:
"How buildings make people behave."
She stopped.

This was actually something he believed.
"What do you mean?"
He pointed toward the room.
"Like this place. Everybody acts different because it used to be a church."
She looked around.
"Do they?"
"Maybe not because they know it. But the room does something."
He was inventing while speaking.
This was one of his strengths.
Also several of his problems.
"The ceiling. Where the doors are. Who can see who. Where people stand when they first come in. All of it."
Elise looked at him more seriously.
"What are you working on?"
Shit.

Most people caught in a lie retreat toward the truth.
He considered this unimaginative.
"Public space."
"Meaning?"
"Parks. Stations. Places where different kinds of people have to occupy the same space without actually agreeing to be together."
This was, inconveniently, a good answer.
He had thought about this.
Subways.
Stoops.
Dining halls.
Libraries.
Baseball fields.
The lie had found authentic material and begun feeding on it.
This made it stronger.

"What architect?"
she asked.
He heard:
Name one.
He knew a few names.
Not enough.
Selected one.
She nodded.
Then gave another.
He recognized the name but had read almost nothing.
He performed recognition.
She continued.
Now the conversation had entered professional waters.
He could feel the floor dropping.
He could retreat.
Tell her he had misspoken.
Say he was considering architecture.
Say he was drunk.
Say anything.
Instead he expanded.
"I'm more interested in sociology than design anyway."
Elise tilted her head.
"So you're an architecture student who doesn't care about architecture."
"I didn't say that."
"You kind of did."
"Depends what you think architecture is."
She laughed.
There.
Recovered.

He liked her.
Not simply because she was attractive.
Because she seemed amused without being fooled.

There is a particular vanity in wanting to deceive someone perceptive.
Easy believers do not provide enough resistance.

Music shifted.
A hip-hop record came through.
His body recognized it before the conversation did.
He moved slightly.
Elise noticed.
"You like this?"
"Yeah."
"What do you usually listen to?"
Dangerous question.
Not because of music.
Because of audience.
He looked at her.
"What do you?"
She smiled.
"That's cheating."
"Research."
"Hip-hop. Some dance stuff. Latin stuff. Depends."
There.
A permission structure.
He said:
"Same."
True.
Then a smoother record followed.
The kind he would have defended differently depending on who stood nearby.
He liked that too.
Elise did not react.
He watched her.
She watched him watching her.
"You need permission?"
"What?"

"To like it."
He laughed.
"No."
"Then why are you looking at me?"
He had no answer that would preserve dignity.
So he danced.

For several minutes, maybe twenty, maybe longer, he forgot almost everything.
Manny.
Ana.
College.
Architecture.
The borrowed identification.
The fact that he had promised to go back outside.
He danced with Elise.
Talked.
Drank something someone handed him.
Bought another.
Money diminished.
He noticed.
Then stopped noticing.
Someone introduced them to two other people.
One worked in fashion.
One claimed music.
Nobody asked for verification.
This was the ecosystem.
Claims survived until challenged.
Confidence was collateral.

He told the fashion person he had worked "around clothes."
This meant he had purchased shirts in Washington Heights apartments and once stood inside Charivari pretending prices did not frighten him.
The woman asked:

"Retail?"
He said:
"Sort of."
Perfect.
She accepted it.
The protagonist felt a small burst of pleasure.
He hated that he felt it.
Then continued.

At some point he went to the bathroom.
In the mirror, under terrible light, he looked younger.
Considerably.
The club had been doing some of the work for him.
Mirrors were less cooperative.
A man beside him washed his hands.
Looked over.
"You all right?"
"Yeah."
"You look like you just found out something."
The protagonist smiled.
"Maybe."
The man shrugged.
"Don't do that here."
"What?"
"Find shit out."
Then left.
The protagonist stared at the mirror.
He had no idea whether this had been profound or whether the man was simply high.
New York frequently outsourced philosophy to unreliable contractors.

He remembered Manny.
Immediately.
The promise.

How long?
He checked the time.
Over an hour.
Maybe closer to two.
Fuck.
He pushed through the crowd toward the entrance.
At the door, security stopped him.
"Where you going?"
"Outside."
"Then you're out."
"What?"
"No reentry."
"My friend's outside."
The guard shrugged.
"Then go outside."
The protagonist looked back.
Inside.
Elise somewhere behind him.
The friend who got in.
Music.
The room.
Then toward the door.
Manny.
He could leave.
This was the actual choice.
Finally.
No theory.
No ambiguity.
No notebook.
Door or room.

He hesitated.
This matters.
Not because hesitation is betrayal.

Because later he would remember himself as having immediately decided to leave.
He did not.
He stood there long enough to calculate what would be lost.
Then:
"Fuck it."
He went outside.

Manny was gone.
Of course.
The sidewalk had changed populations.
Different line.
Different faces.
The night colder than when they arrived.
The protagonist looked left.
Right.
Walked toward the corner.
Nothing.
No cell phone.
No text.
No little location dot revealing whether Manny was on the train, at a diner, pissed off, injured, home, or still nearby.
The absence felt physical.
He waited.
Ten minutes.
Twenty.
Maybe longer.
Now loyalty had become retroactive.
He began imagining Manny returning.
This allowed him to believe waiting mattered.

One of the other friends eventually came out.
"Yo, where's Manny?"
The protagonist looked at him.
"Left."

"When?"
"I don't know."
"You said you were going back out."
"I did."
The friend looked toward the club.
"Now."
The protagonist hated the accuracy.
"I got stuck inside."
"How?"
He began explaining.
Door policy.
Lost track.
Couldn't find him.
The friend listened.
Then said:
"You forgot."
"No."
"You forgot."
"I didn't forget. I was—"
He stopped.
Because he had forgotten.
Not permanently.
Enough.
The distinction was cosmetic.

They took the train home.
The protagonist talked less.
His friend talked about the club.
A woman.
A DJ.
Someone famous maybe.
The protagonist half listened.
He thought about Manny.
Then about Elise.

Then about whether she thought he was an architecture student.
Then about whether he would ever see her again.
Then about Manny again.
Guilt is rarely pure enough to occupy the whole mind.
This is one of its humiliations.

He reached home close to dawn.
His mother was asleep.
Or pretending.
The apartment quiet.
He removed his shoes carefully.
The telephone sat where it always sat.
He looked at it.
Too early.
Too late.
Same problem.
He went to bed.
Did not sleep much.

Manny called around noon.
The protagonist answered on the second ring.
"Yo."
"Yo."
Silence.
"You got home?"
Manny laughed.
Not pleasantly.
"Yeah."
"Why'd you leave?"
Another laugh.
"Why'd I leave?"
"I came out."
"When?"
"I don't know. Like—"

"Two fucking hours."
"It wasn't two hours."
"It was."
The protagonist could hear himself preparing corrections.
Maybe hour and a half.
Maybe line was long.
Maybe—
Manny interrupted before he spoke.
"I waited."
Simple.
There it was.

"I know."
"No, you don't. You were inside."
"Come on, man."
"I waited."
The protagonist felt accused beyond proportion.
Which usually meant proportion had landed correctly.
"I said I'm sorry."
He had not.
Not yet.
Manny noticed.
"You didn't."
The protagonist stopped.
"All right. I'm sorry."
Silence.
Then Manny:
"You always got a reason."
This was not new.
That made it worse.

"I lost track of time."
"I know."
"The place was crazy."
"I know."

"They weren't letting people back in."
"You weren't trying to come back out."
The protagonist felt anger.
Again.
Exposure disguised as accusation.
"How the fuck do you know what I was trying to do?"
"Because you didn't."
There are arguments that end because one side has become too simple to attack.
The protagonist had no reply.
So he changed the subject slightly.
"I came out."
"Eventually."
"I could've stayed."
Manny laughed.
That one was fatal.
The protagonist knew it before Manny answered.
"Oh, so now I should thank you?"
"No. That's not what I'm saying."
"Then what are you saying?"
He did not know.
He was saying:
Give me credit for the moment I finally did what I had promised earlier.
He heard it.
Ugly.

Manny said:
"Forget it."
The protagonist hated forget it more than yelling.
"No."
"I said forget it."
"We're good?"
Another pause.
"I don't know."

That phrase again.
Ana.
Professors.
Life.
The protagonist was beginning to discover that other people's uncertainty could not be argued into resolution.
He despised this lesson consistently.

They did not speak for three days.
This was long for them.
Not catastrophic.
Long enough to notice.
The protagonist considered calling.
Did not.
Then considered that Manny should call.
Then remembered he was the one who had left him outside.
Then felt resentful that responsibility apparently included initiating repair.
Character remained administratively burdensome.

On the fourth day Manny showed up at the apartment.
No announcement.
His mother let him in.
Of course.
Manny entered the protagonist's room.
Looked around.
"Your mother says you sleeping till noon now."
"It's summer."
"College ruined you."
The protagonist smiled.
Manny sat.
No apology accepted.
No ceremony.
They talked about baseball.
Someone they both knew.

Music.
A party.
Everything except the club.
This was not forgiveness exactly.
It was continuation.
People often resume before resolving.
Sometimes that is grace.
Sometimes avoidance.
Usually both.

After a while Manny said:
"So, architecture?"
The protagonist looked at him.
"What?"
Manny smiled.
The friend had told him.
"You studying architecture now?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Fuck you."
"Blackie's manager becomes architect."
"Shut up."
"That's a good career path."
They laughed.
There.
The wound opened enough to let air in.

Then Manny said:
"Was she fine?"
The protagonist smiled.
"Very."
"Worth two hours?"
The smile left.
Manny had asked lightly.
Maybe.
The protagonist looked at him.

"No."
Manny nodded.
Nothing triumphant.
No lesson.
"Good."
Then they moved on.

Later that summer, the protagonist would remember the club mostly through images.
The old church ceiling.
Elise laughing.
The borrowed identification in the doorman's hand.
Music changing.
A mirror in the bathroom.
Manny's face outside.
The word no.
He would tell the story differently depending on the audience.
Sometimes it became a funny story about getting into Limelight underage.
Sometimes a story about pretending to study architecture.
Sometimes a story about how easily adults believed confidence.
Sometimes a story about Manny getting rejected at the door.
The part where he promised to come back out often arrived late.
Sometimes not at all.
Memory, like every other institution he distrusted, had selection criteria.

He did not write about the night immediately.
This was unusual.
The notebook remained closed for several days.
Then one afternoon he opened it.
He wrote:

YOU CAN BE LOYAL AND STILL DO DISLOYAL THINGS.
He stared.
Too forgiving.
Crossed out be loyal.
Wrote:
CALLING YOURSELF LOYAL DOESN'T MATTER WHEN SOMEBODY IS WAITING OUTSIDE.
Better.
Then stopped.
He did not write about architecture.
He did not write about Elise.
He did not write about masks.
The story had already done enough.

Years later he would become interested in the distance between identity and behavior.
What we call ourselves.
What we repeatedly do.
What we insist we meant.
What another person had to stand outside and experience.
At eighteen he had no elegant formulation.
He had Manny's sentence.
I waited.
That was enough.
For once, reality had better dialogue.

Chapter 15

“The Things We Call Love”

The first time Ana told him she loved him, he said:
"I love you too."
This was true.
The trouble began later, when he tried to determine what true meant.

They were walking near her building.
Nothing cinematic.
No rain.
No perfectly timed song coming through an open window.
No taxi splashing through a puddle while two young people discovered eternity.
Garbage bags waited near a curb.
A car alarm had been going off long enough to become neighborhood infrastructure.
Someone upstairs was arguing in Spanish.
A bus exhaled at the corner.
Ana had been talking about something her mother said.
Then she stopped.
Looked at him.
"I love you."
There.
Three words.
No preamble.
The protagonist felt them enter.
Warmth first.

Then fear.
Then the immediate administrative burden of response.
"I love you too."
Ana smiled.
He kissed her.
They continued walking.
This should have been enough.

That night he opened his notebook.
Of course.
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE SOMEBODY?
There are people who can receive a beautiful thing without disassembling it on the kitchen table.
He was not among them.

He tried definitions.
Wanting somebody happy.
Too easy.
Wanting to be near them.
Neediness could do that.
Protecting them.
Possession could wear that jacket.
Accepting them.
What if they were wrong?
Sacrifice.
How much?
Trust.
He had already damaged that.
Desire.
Obviously insufficient.
Friendship plus sex?
Embarrassing.
He crossed out the entire page.
Ana had given him three words.
He had responded with an investigation.

His mother noticed something the next morning.
She was making coffee.
"You look happy."
"I'm always happy."
She looked at him.
"Okay."
"Why does everybody say okay like that?"
"Like what?"
"Like you know something."
"I know plenty."
"About me."
She smiled.
"Unfortunately."
He opened the refrigerator.

"What's her name?"
He turned.
"You know her name."
"I know."
"Then why'd you ask?"
"To see your face."
He shut the refrigerator.
"You people need hobbies."
His mother laughed.

Love entered the family through teasing because sincerity required protective equipment.
His brother heard next.
"You're in love?"
"Who said that?"
"Ma."
"She doesn't know shit."
From the kitchen:
"I hear you."

"See?"
His brother smiled.
"Look at Romeo."
"Go fuck yourself."
"Very romantic."

His father said nothing.
For two days.
Then they were in the car together.
Just the two of them.
Traffic.
Radio low.
His father asked:
"You serious about the girl?"
The protagonist looked out the window.
"I don't know."
His father nodded.
"You like her?"
"Yeah."
"She good to you?"
"Yeah."
"You good to her?"
The protagonist paused.
His father glanced over.
"That took too long."
The protagonist laughed.
"Fuck you."
His father smiled.
Then:
"Don't make somebody pay for shit they didn't do."
The protagonist turned.
"What does that mean?"
His father shrugged.
"It means what it means."
"Did you?"

"Did I what?"
"Make somebody pay for shit they didn't do?"
His father adjusted the radio.
"Everybody does."
"That's not an answer."
"Then don't ask questions you don't need answers to."
The protagonist hated this.
Mostly because he wanted the answer.

His parents' marriage had begun becoming visible to him as a marriage rather than simply the atmospheric condition under which his childhood occurred.
This happens eventually.
A mother becomes a woman.
A father becomes a man.
Then, if you're unlucky enough to keep paying attention, both become people.
The demotion is severe.

He noticed things.
His mother knew when his father was worried before his father admitted being worried.
His father brought home something she liked without presenting it as romance.
They argued over money.
Family.
Time.
Who had said what to whom.
Who was supposed to call somebody.
His father sometimes became quiet when angry.
His mother became more articulate.
This was strategically unfortunate for him.
She could produce an indictment while he was still assembling silence.

They could be cruel.
Not spectacularly.
Precisely.
Long relationships provide coordinates.
A stranger throws rocks at a house.
A spouse knows which window is open.
The protagonist noticed this.
He wished he hadn't.
Then noticed tenderness twenty minutes later.
His mother putting food aside for his father despite still being angry.
His father checking the car before she drove somewhere.
Neither announcing anything.
No resolution.
Dinner.

One night they argued in the kitchen.
The protagonist was in his room.
He could hear enough to know he should not listen.
So he listened carefully.
Money.
Something his father had promised.
Something his mother had done without telling him.
Then older material entered.
This fascinated and frightened him.
Arguments had archives.
A grievance from years earlier could apparently be recalled with exact date, weather conditions, and supporting witnesses.
Human memory was unreliable except during marriage, where it became prosecutorial.

His mother's voice rose.
His father's became quieter.
Then she said:

"You always do that."
Always.
The protagonist smiled despite himself.
There it was.
Everybody.
Nobody.
Always.
Never.
The language of people temporarily abandoning evidence.
Then his father said:
"And you never—"
Excellent.
Both parties had suspended standards.

The protagonist considered entering.
Not physically.
Intellectually.
He could see both sides.
This was his favorite place.
He began constructing arguments for each.
His mother had a point because—
His father had a point because—
Then his brother appeared in the doorway.
"Don't."
"I wasn't doing anything."
"Your face."
Again with the face.
"What?"
"You look like you're about to moderate."
The protagonist laughed.
"I could help."
"No."
"Why?"
"Because they're married."
"So?"

His brother stared at him.
"Exactly."
Then walked away.

The argument ended without him.
Remarkably, civilization continued.
The next morning his parents were speaking.
Not warmly.
Speaking.
By evening, normal.
The protagonist wanted to know how the dispute had been resolved.
He asked his mother.
"It wasn't."
"What do you mean?"
"We talked."
"So who's right?"
She looked at him.
"Go do something."

This disturbed him.
He had assumed successful relationships resolved arguments.
Apparently many simply absorbed them.
The unresolved thing remained but became smaller than the relationship.
Or buried.
He could not tell which.
Maybe neither could they.

With Ana, he began watching himself.
This is dangerous.
Watching yourself love can interfere with loving.
Was he generous because he loved her or because he wanted to see himself as generous?

Did he listen because he cared or because she had once praised him for listening longer?
Did he buy something because it would make her happy or because giving created a version of him he enjoyed?
If he wanted her to notice the sacrifice, was it still sacrifice?
He could destroy almost any decent impulse this way.
Self-awareness had discovered acid.

Ana noticed.
They were sitting in a diner.
She was eating fries from his plate despite having said she did not want fries.
An ancient ritual.
He had become quiet.
"What?"
"Nothing."
She took another.
"You're thinking."
"I usually am."
"That's the problem."
He smiled.
Then:
"Do you ever wonder if you're doing something nice because you want credit for being nice?"
Ana chewed.
"No."
"Never?"
"Maybe."
"Then how do you know if it's actually nice?"
She reached for another fry.
He moved the plate away.
She stared.
"That's not nice."
He laughed.
She pulled the plate back.

"I'm serious."
"I know."
"So?"
Ana shrugged.
"If you do something nice and part of you likes being nice, who cares?"
"But what if that's why you did it?"
"Did what?"
"Anything."
"Give me an example."
He couldn't.
This irritated him.
Theory performed better without witnesses.

Ana said:
"You think having a bad reason hiding somewhere cancels the good reason."
"Sometimes it does."
"Sometimes."
"Right."
"So?"
He stared at her.
She ate another fry.
He wanted to confiscate the plate again but understood the rhetorical consequences.

Then she said:
"Maybe people don't have one reason."
He smiled.
"Now you're stealing my shit."
"Your shit?"
"Two things can be true."
Ana rolled her eyes.
"Yes. You invented complexity."

"Thank you."
"You're welcome."

She leaned closer.
"Maybe you love me because I make you feel good."
He waited.
"And because you care about me."
He nodded.
"And because you're attracted to me."
"Obviously."
"Asshole."
"Continue."
"And because you're scared to lose me."
He stopped smiling.
"And because you like who you are with me sometimes."
He looked down.
"And maybe sometimes you use me to feel better about yourself."
He looked up.
Ana shrugged.
"People are messy."
He disliked how calmly she occupied ideas he needed notebooks to approach.

"So that's okay?"
"I didn't say okay."
"There it is again."
She smiled.
"I said it's real."

He thought about this for days.
Not because it was especially difficult.
Because it threatened one of his favorite systems.
Good motives.
Bad motives.

Good person.
Bad person.
Honest.
Dishonest.
Love.
Possession.
Generosity.
Need.
He wanted labels to behave.
People kept contaminating them.

Sex complicated things further.
It was not merely desire anymore.
Sometimes it was tenderness.
Sometimes reassurance.
Sometimes hunger.
Sometimes boredom.
Sometimes fear after an argument.
Sometimes celebration.
Sometimes proof they were still okay.
This last use worried him.
Bodies could become ballots.
He began noticing how often physical closeness answered questions nobody had spoken.

One night after they argued, Ana kissed him.
He kissed back.
The argument disappeared.
Temporarily.
Later, lying beside her, he said:
"We didn't solve anything."
She laughed softly.
"No."
"Then what was that?"
She turned toward him.

"Do you need a fucking bibliography?"
He laughed so hard he had to bury his face in the pillow.

The argument had been about jealousy.
His.
This embarrassed him.
Jealousy did not fit the identity he preferred.
He was independent.
Secure.
Not controlling.
Sophisticated enough to understand that attraction did not disappear because people entered relationships.
All true.
Then Ana mentioned a guy from school who had driven her home.
The protagonist asked:
"Who?"
She told him.
"Why?"
"Because it was late."
"Why him?"
"He has a car."
Reasonable.
This was unacceptable.

"You couldn't take the train?"
Ana looked at him.
"At one in the morning?"
"You've done it before."
"Yeah."
"So?"
"So he offered."
The protagonist nodded.
Too much.
Ana saw it.

"What?"
"Nothing."
"Oh my God."
"What?"
"You're jealous."
He laughed.
"No, I'm not."
"You're doing the face."
There was apparently a face for everything.

"I'm asking."
"No. You're investigating."
"What's the difference?"
"About forty questions."
He leaned back.
"Did anything happen?"
Ana stared.
There.
He had crossed it.
"What do you mean?"
"You know what I mean."
"No. Say it."
He suddenly understood the trap because he had built versions of it himself.
"Did he try anything?"
"Why does that matter?"
"Because—"
"Do you trust me?"
The question arrived with history.
He stopped.

"Yes."
"Then what are you asking?"
He had answers.
Men.

Intentions.
Safety.
Respect.
Boundaries.
All potentially valid.
None explained the heat in his chest.
"I don't know."
Ana nodded.
"Okay."
He almost objected to okay again.
Didn't.

The jealousy remained.
Naming it did not kill it.
This disappointed him.
He had begun expecting vocabulary to function as extermination.

Later he wrote:
UNDERSTANDING A FEELING DOESN'T MEAN THE FEELING HAS TO LEAVE.
Then:
MAYBE THE POINT IS NOT TO LET IT DRIVE.
He liked this.
Immediately imagined himself years older quoting it wisely.
Then became embarrassed by the fantasy.
He crossed out nothing.

A week later the same guy called Ana's house while the protagonist was there.
Her mother answered.
"Ana! Telephone!"
Ana went into the other room.
The protagonist heard her laugh.
His body reacted before philosophy.

He disliked the laugh.
This was insane.
It was a laugh.
He had no property interest in laughter.
Still disliked it.

When she returned:
"Who was that?"
She looked at him.
He heard himself.
"Never mind."
"No."
"No, seriously."
"Who do you think?"
"The guy?"
"His name is Daniel."
"I know his name."
"Then use it."
This landed.
He had turned a person into a category.
The guy.
Threat.
Competitor.
He had spent years resenting being reduced to Bronx, Latino, athlete, whatever other categories strangers selected.
Now Daniel had become the guy.
Convenient.

"What did he want?"
"Notes from class."
The protagonist smiled.
Ana stared.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Say it."

"No."
"Say it."
"That's the oldest bullshit in the world."
"What is?"
"Calling for notes."
Ana became angry.
"Maybe he wants to fuck me."
The protagonist froze.
She continued.
"Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he likes me. Maybe he likes my notes. Maybe all three. What do you want me to do?"
He did not answer.
"Never talk to men?"
"No."
"Then what?"
"I don't know."
"Good."
He hated good almost as much as okay.

She sat down.
Then, quieter:
"You don't get to turn your fear into my rules."
There.
He looked at her.
He knew immediately the sentence mattered.
He also knew immediately he wanted to defeat it.
These two impulses frequently arrived together.

"What if I'm right?"
"About what?"
"About him."
"So?"
"So if he wants something—"
"Then he wants something."
"That doesn't bother you?"

"Maybe."
"Then why talk to him?"
Ana stared.
"Because I decide who I talk to."
There.
Door closed.

He felt anger.
Real.
He wanted to say something sharp.
He knew several things about Ana that could wound.
Coordinates.
Open windows.
He remembered the previous time.
The look on her face.
The letter.
The week of uncertainty.
He could feel the weapon in his mouth.
And did not use it.
This was not enlightenment.
It was restraint.
Less glamorous.
More useful.

Instead:
"I don't like it."
Ana nodded.
"Okay."
He let okay live.
"I don't know what to do with that."
"You don't have to do anything."
"I hate that answer."
"I know."
They sat.
No sex.

No immediate reconciliation.
Just discomfort.
The protagonist remained in the room with a feeling he could neither solve nor outsource.
This may have been one of the more difficult things he had done.
Nobody applauded.

Later, walking home, he was angry at Ana.
Then Daniel.
Then himself.
Then social arrangements generally.
By the time he reached his block he had briefly implicated Western civilization.
He sat on the stoop.
Manny was there.
Of course.

"You look miserable."
"I'm thinking."
"Same thing."
The protagonist sat.
Told him.
Manny listened.
Then:
"She fuck him?"
"No."
"Kiss him?"
"No."
"Tell you she wants him?"
"No."
"Then what happened?"
"He drove her home."
Manny stared.
"That's it?"

"It's not just that."
"What's the other part?"
The protagonist explained tone.
Phone call.
Notes.
Laugh.
Manny listened.
"You're a fucking idiot."
"Thank you."
"No problem."

"What if he likes her?"
Manny shrugged.
"He probably does."
The protagonist turned.
"What?"
"She's pretty."
"Fuck you."
"What? You want ugly girls to like her?"
The protagonist started laughing.
Against his will.
Manny continued.
"You like her."
"Obviously."
"So why is everybody else supposed to be blind?"
This was offensively reasonable.

"It's disrespectful."
"Did he disrespect you?"
"He knows she has a boyfriend."
"Does he?"
"Probably."
"Did she disrespect you?"
The protagonist paused.
"No."

"Then shut the fuck up."
"I hate talking to you."
"Then stop."
Neither moved.

A car passed playing music.
Freestyle.
The protagonist knew the song.
Liked it.
Manny looked over.
"Don't."
"What?"
"I can see you deciding."
The protagonist laughed.
"Deciding what?"
"Whether you like it."
"I like it."
"Good."
"Still like hip-hop more."
"Nobody asked."
There it was.
Old joke.
Still useful.

They listened until the car disappeared.
Then Manny said:
"You know what your problem is?"
The protagonist groaned.
"Please."
"You want everything you care about locked up."
The protagonist looked at him.
"What does that mean?"
"Your girl. Your ideas. Your people. The Bronx. Baseball. Whatever."
"That's not true."

"Okay."
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.

"No, I'm serious. You get mad when somebody else touches something you think is yours."
"People aren't things."
"I know."
"So that's stupid."
"Then stop acting like it."
The protagonist looked toward the street.
Manny had become irritatingly efficient.
College had professors.
The Bronx had Manny.
Tuition structures differed.

That summer, the protagonist worked.
Not enough.
Read.
Too much.
Played baseball.
Argued.
Saw Ana.
Went out.
Came home late.
His mother worried.
His father pretended not to.
His brother collected material.
Nothing extraordinary happened for several weeks.
This is important.
A life cannot consist entirely of formative incidents.
Most character develops while buying toothpaste.

He worked a job he considered beneath his potential.
The job did not know this.

It required him to arrive on time.
This was offensive.
A supervisor named Mr. Kaplan cared nothing about his notebooks, political opinions, batting average, or intellectual promise.
Mr. Kaplan cared whether the protagonist was there at nine.
At 9:07, potential had no market value.

The protagonist was late three times in two weeks.
Each time he had a reason.
Train delay.
Stayed up studying.
Family thing.
One was entirely true.
One mostly.
One had been improved.
Mr. Kaplan listened to the third.
Then:
"You're late."
"I know, but—"
"I don't care why."
"You should care why."
Mr. Kaplan looked at him.
"Why?"
The protagonist was momentarily stunned.
Because context matters.
Because explanation isn't excuse but—
Mr. Kaplan continued:
"If the train breaks down once, that's the train. If you're late every week, that's you."
The protagonist disliked this man enormously.

"That's not fair."
"I'm not your father."
"I didn't say you were."

"Good. Be here at nine tomorrow."
Conversation over.
The protagonist spent half the day constructing a devastating response.
He never delivered it.
This preserved his employment.

At home he complained.
His father asked:
"What time you supposed to be there?"
"Nine."
"What time you get there?"
"Nine-oh-seven."
His father nodded.
"Sounds like you're late."
"You're missing the point."
"No. I found it very fast."
His brother laughed from the other room.
The protagonist considered emigrating.

The next morning he arrived at 8:52.
Mr. Kaplan said nothing.
This bothered him.
He wanted acknowledgment.
At 8:52 he had performed moral transformation.
Nobody noticed.
He arrived early the next day too.
Nothing.
Third day.
Nothing.
By the second week, he stopped expecting praise.
Something interesting happened.
He was simply on time.
No identity required.

This disturbed his theory of motivation.
He had assumed change needed insight.
Sometimes it needed an alarm clock.

One afternoon Mr. Kaplan asked him to stay fifteen minutes late.
The protagonist did.
No complaint.
As he left, Kaplan said:
"Thanks."
One word.
The protagonist felt absurdly good.
He hated himself for caring.
Then remembered.
Maybe liking credit did not cancel doing the thing.
Ana.
Fucking Ana.
She was colonizing his philosophy.

He bought her something with his first paycheck.
Not expensive.
A book she had mentioned wanting.
He wrapped it badly.
Gave it to her.
She smiled.
"You remembered."
"Yeah."
He wanted to tell her how much it cost.
Did not.
Wanted to mention he had gone out of his way.
Did not.
Wanted to explain that he had remembered the title from a conversation weeks earlier, which demonstrated listening.
Did not.
This silence required heroic restraint.

Ana kissed him.
"Thank you."
"You're welcome."
That was all.
He felt good.
Then noticed he felt good.
Then nearly began analyzing whether feeling good contaminated generosity.
Stopped.
For perhaps eight seconds.
Progress.

His parents' marriage remained in his peripheral vision.
One evening his father came home exhausted.
Sat in the chair.
His mother brought him food without asking.
He ate.
Later he washed the plate.
This was unusual enough that she noticed.
"You okay?"
"Yeah."
"You washed the plate."
"I know how to wash a plate."
"I've been waiting twenty years for evidence."
His father laughed.
Then dried it.
The protagonist watched from the doorway.
No declaration.
No lesson.
Two people maintaining something.
Maybe love was partly maintenance.
The word disappointed him.
Maintenance sounded like plumbing.
Maybe that was the point.

He opened the notebook later.
Started:
LOVE IS—
Stopped.
Crossed out the entire beginning.
Fuck it.
He was tired of definitions.
Instead he wrote what happened.
Dad washed the plate.
Nothing else.

Months later he would find that line and have no idea why he had written it.
Then remember.
This pleased me when I learned of it.
Though perhaps he didn't remember.
Perhaps he reconstructed.
Memory again.
Always offering receipts from stores that may no longer exist.

Toward the end of summer, Ana and he argued again.
Different subject.
Same machinery.
She accused him of not listening.
He accused her of deciding what he meant before he said it.
Both accusations contained evidence.
This made the fight stronger.
At some point she said:
"You always need to win."
He replied:
"That's bullshit."
Then spent twenty minutes proving it.
One appreciates efficiency.

Finally Ana started laughing.
This enraged him.
"What's funny?"
"You."
"Why?"
"You're arguing that you don't always argue."
He stopped.
She laughed harder.
He tried not to.
Failed.
The fight collapsed.
Not resolved.
Collapsed.
Humor had once again entered through a side door while dignity guarded the front.

When they calmed down, Ana said:
"I don't need you to agree with me all the time."
"Good."
"I need to know you're actually hearing me."
"I do hear you."
"Sometimes you're just waiting."
"For what?"
"Your turn."
He looked away.
There it was.
He knew this behavior.
Classrooms.
Dinner.
Manny.
Professors.
Arguments.
He listened for openings.
Not always meaning.

"How do I know the difference?"
Ana shrugged.
"Maybe stop preparing your answer while I'm talking."
This sounded impossible.
"What am I supposed to do with my brain?"
"Nothing."
"That's not how brains work."
"See?"
"What?"
"I'm still talking."
He laughed.
"Sorry."

She continued.
He tried.
Actually tried.
No internal rebuttal.
No organizing.
No strongest-counterargument exercise.
Just her words.
He lasted longer than expected.
Then caught himself preparing.
Stopped.
Returned.
Ana finished.
He waited.
Not theatrically.
Maybe slightly theatrically.
"What?" she said.
"I'm listening."
"Now you look constipated."
He laughed.
"Fuck this."
She kissed him.

He was beginning to discover that being a good listener was not primarily an intellectual activity.
This was devastating news.

At summer's end, college waited again.
Ana would remain.
Manny.
Family.
He would leave.
Again.
The second departure felt less dramatic.
This made him sad.
First times demand ceremony.
Repetition becomes logistics.
Laundry.
Packing.
Train schedules.
Books.

The night before he left, he and Ana sat on the stoop.
His stoop this time.
She leaned against him.
They said little.
The protagonist noticed the silence and almost commented on how comfortable silence demonstrated intimacy.
Then realized doing so would ruin it.
A genuine breakthrough.

After a while Ana said:
"What are you thinking?"
Dangerous.
He considered lying.
"That I don't want to fuck this up."
She nodded.
"Me neither."

He looked at her.
"That's romantic."
"I try."

Then:
"You think we're going to stay together?"
There it was.
Future.
The country where seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds suddenly become unreliable cartographers.
He could say yes.
She might want yes.
He wanted yes.
He also knew he did not know.
Months earlier he might have given certainty as a gift.
Or as control.
Now:
"I hope so."
Ana looked at him.
Not disappointed.
Not relieved.
Just looking.
"Me too."

He felt the urge to improve the answer.
Add commitment.
Promise.
Explain.
He didn't.
They sat.
A car passed.
Someone yelled from a window.
A dog barked.
The city continued its complete indifference to their emotional significance.

The protagonist felt small.
Not diminished.
Small.
There was a difference he did not yet have language for.
His love for Ana mattered enormously to him.
Maybe to her.
To their families, somewhat.
To Manny when forced to hear about it.
Beyond that?
Nothing.
Buildings remained.
Trains ran.
Millions of people loved somebody.
Millions stopped.
Millions began.
The universe maintained no file.
Strangely, this did not make the feeling less important.
It made importance local.
He liked that.

He did not reach for the notebook.
Ana's hand was already in his.
For once he let that be the record.

Chapter 16

“The People Who Leave”

He learned about death the way most young people do.
Incorrectly.
Not the concept.
The concept was easy.
People die.
Adults had been saying this forever.
Grandparents.
Neighbors.
People in newspapers.
Baseball players from another era.
Strangers on television.
Death had always existed somewhere else, doing paperwork.
The mistake was believing distance was part of the arrangement.

The phone rang early.
Too early for anything good.
His mother answered.
He heard her voice change.
Not louder.
Smaller.
That was worse.
He sat up.
The apartment had a different atmosphere before anyone explained why.
Doors opened.

Feet moved.
His father appeared in the hallway already dressed enough to leave.
His brother asked:
"What happened?"
Nobody answered him immediately.
This was how the answer arrived.
Through delay.

An uncle had died.
Not ancient.
Not expected enough.
Not young enough for the newspapers.
Family age.
An age at which people begin saying too young with more conviction.
Heart.
Maybe.
The details traveled badly.
Hospital.
Chest.
Collapsed.
They tried.
He's gone.
Every version reached the apartment through another person's mouth.
By breakfast there were already three timelines.

The protagonist asked:
"What exactly happened?"
His mother looked at him.
He repeated:
"I mean, did he have something wrong with him?"
"I don't know."
"Was he sick?"

"I don't know."
"Did he go to the hospital before?"
She turned.
"I don't know."
He stopped.
Information was not arriving quickly enough for him.
This felt almost offensive.

His father sat quietly.
The protagonist had seen his father angry.
Tired.
Drunk enough to become funnier.
Worried about money.
Proud.
Embarrassed.
He had rarely seen him still.
His father's hands rested on his knees.
No television.
No chair entitlement.
No government.
No explanation.
Just hands.

The protagonist wanted to say something.
Nothing seemed usable.
So he asked:
"You okay?"
His father looked at him.
Long pause.
"No."
Then looked away.
The protagonist had no response.
The answer had been too accurate.

The funeral took place two days later.

Everyone wore black or something sufficiently close.
The protagonist had a jacket he disliked.
Too formal.
Too old.
His mother told him it was fine.
This was not a fashion event.
He knew that.
Still looked at himself twice before leaving.
Humans maintain vanity under hostile conditions.

The funeral home smelled like flowers and carpet.
A particular kind of cold air.
People spoke softly even when the room was loud.
Relatives appeared from everywhere.
Some he knew.
Some knew him.
Some claimed to remember him as a baby, which required trust because he had no independent records of these encounters.
Hands on shoulders.
Long hugs.
Short hugs.
Cheek kisses.
Names whispered urgently afterward:
"Who was that?"
"Your father's cousin."
"Which cousin?"
"Don't start."

The body was at the front.
He knew this.
Did not look immediately.
He greeted people.
Listened.
Waited.

Watched how others approached.
Some crossed themselves.
Some touched the coffin.
Some cried before reaching it.
Some stared.
Some did not.
There appeared to be no correct procedure.
This bothered him.

His mother went first.
Then his father.
The protagonist watched his father stand beside the coffin.
His father looked older.
Not because grief had transformed him theatrically.
Because for one moment the protagonist saw a man whose life contained years that had nothing to do with being someone's father.
Childhood.
Brothers.
Arguments.
Jobs.
Women.
Mistakes.
People who knew him before the protagonist existed.
The realization felt intrusive.

His father touched the dead man's hand.
Then stepped away.
That was all.

The protagonist approached.
He looked.
There are details books get wrong because writers are tempted to make death visually profound.
The uncle looked partly like himself.

That was what disturbed him.
Not peaceful.
Not transformed.
Almost.
His face was familiar and not.
Like someone had made a very accurate imitation and then removed whatever made accuracy matter.
The protagonist stared too long.
A relative behind him shifted.
He moved.

Outside the viewing room, a woman was telling a story.
His uncle had once driven six hours because somebody's car broke down.
Another person corrected her.
"Four hours."
"No, six."
"It wasn't six."
"They were in Virginia."
"No, Maryland."
The dead man had been gone less than forty-eight hours and history was already negotiating.
The protagonist listened.
This interested him more than he wanted it to.

At another cluster:
"He never complained."
Someone nodded.
"Never."
The protagonist remembered hearing the uncle complain many times.
Politics.
Back pain.
Traffic.
Food at a restaurant.

A landlord.
The Yankees.
Perhaps grief had different standards for complaint.

"He'd give you the shirt off his back."
Another universal.
The protagonist looked toward the coffin.
A dead man became generous quickly.
Patient.
Funny.
Hardworking.
Loving.
Stubborn, but only in stories where stubbornness could be made charming.
Death appeared to improve adjectives.

He felt guilty for noticing.
Then guilty for the guilt because noticing did not mean disrespect.
Then tired of the entire internal court.
He went outside.

Manny had come.
Not because he knew the uncle well.
Because the protagonist's uncle had died.
Different obligation.
He was standing near the curb smoking.
The protagonist joined him.
Manny offered one.
"No."
Manny shrugged.
They stood.

"How you doing?"
The protagonist hated the question.

"I don't know."
Manny nodded.
No okay.
This helped.

After a minute the protagonist said:
"Everybody's saying shit that isn't true."
Manny looked over.
"Like what?"
"Like he never complained. He complained all the fucking time."
Manny laughed.
The protagonist laughed too.
Immediately felt terrible.
Then laughed harder because feeling terrible made it funnier.
Manny looked toward the funeral home.
"Maybe you're allowed to edit when somebody dies."
"Why?"
"I don't know."
"Then what's the point?"
Manny shrugged.
"Maybe the point isn't accuracy."
The protagonist stared.
"That's fucking dangerous."
"You're at a funeral, Professor."
"Still."

Manny took another drag.
"Would you want people at your funeral talking about every stupid thing you did?"
The protagonist thought about fifteen pounds of flour.
California.
Ana.
Club doors.

Architecture.
Countless smaller offenses.
"No."
"Then shut up."
Fair.

But it stayed with him.
What did people owe the dead?
Truth?
Kindness?
Which truth?
The full record?
Impossible.
Every memory was already edited.
Every story emphasized something.
A funeral was not a deposition.
Still, he distrusted transformation by adjectives.

Inside, one aunt was crying hard.
Another was consoling her while whispering something that made both women laugh.
The protagonist saw this from across the room.
He liked it.
Then wondered if liking it was inappropriate.
Then decided death had taken enough authority for one day.

At the burial, wind.
Cold earth.
Shoes sinking slightly.
The coffin suspended above a hole.
The physical fact of the hole offended abstraction.
Funeral homes permitted language.
Passed.
Gone.
Lost.

At the cemetery there was a box and a hole.
Much less cooperative.

The priest spoke.
The protagonist listened.
He had questions.
Not theological exactly.
Logistical.
Where was his uncle now according to this system?
Immediately?
Waiting?
Body here, soul elsewhere?
What age was the soul?
Did personality survive?
What about memory?
Did dead people remain interested in the living?
Would eternity become boring?
He hated that his brain did this.
A man had died and he was cross-examining heaven for procedural clarity.

His mother cried.
He put an arm around her.
No words.
Better.

His father did not cry.
Not there.
The protagonist noticed.
This annoyed him.
Why?
Because he wanted evidence.
Men cry.
Men don't cry.
Masculinity.

Suppression.
Love.
He had theories ready.
Then, that night, he got up for water.
Passed the kitchen.
His father was sitting alone.
Crying.
Quietly.
No audience.
The protagonist stopped before being seen.
Backed away.
Returned to his room.

He did not tell anyone.
This may have been one of the first secrets he kept that improved something.

The next morning his father was normal.
Coffee.
Newspaper.
Radio.
The protagonist looked at him differently.
His father noticed.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Then stop looking at me."
The protagonist smiled.
"Okay."
His father returned to the paper.

At school, death became portable.
People asked how he was.
Some knew.
Some didn't.
A professor gave him an extension.

He said he did not need it.
Then missed the deadline.
Pride occasionally requires administrative assistance.
The professor accepted the work anyway.
No lecture.
The protagonist almost wished for one.
Kindness again.
Creating debt.

He called Ana.
She listened.
No analysis.
At one point he said:
"I don't even know if I'm sad enough."
Ana was quiet.
"What does that mean?"
"I don't know. Like, everybody's crying and shit. I feel bad. I keep thinking about it. But then I eat. Or laugh. Or forget for twenty minutes."
"So?"
"So maybe I'm fucked up."
"No."
"You don't know that."
"Okay. Maybe you're fucked up."
He laughed.
"Thank you."
"You're welcome."

Then she said:
"Maybe grief isn't a job."
He looked at the phone.
"What does that mean?"
"You keep acting like you're supposed to perform it correctly."
He almost argued.

Stopped.

He had noticed this at the funeral.
People grading themselves.
Did I cry enough?
Did I say the right thing?
Did I visit enough before?
Should I have called?
Was I close enough to be this upset?
Was I too upset considering how close we were?
Even grief came with audience.
Sometimes the audience was imaginary.
The worst kind.

That week he reread old notebooks.
Not intentionally related.
He was looking for something else.
Found pages where he had written about adults.
His father.
Mother.
Uncles.
Teachers.
Categories.
Hypocrites.
Cowards.
Hard workers.
Racists.
Generous.
Stupid.
Good.
Bad.
The certainty embarrassed him.
Not because all judgments were wrong.
Because the people were alive while he had been writing them as conclusions.

He found one line about the uncle.
Something trivial.
A family argument years earlier.
The uncle had said something the protagonist considered ignorant.
He had written:
HE'S THE KIND OF PERSON WHO—
Then an entire paragraph.
The protagonist stared.
The kind of person.
As though one statement had completed a human being.
He ripped nothing out.
Important.

He started writing:
NOBODY SHOULD BE REDUCED TO THEIR WORST—
Stopped.
Too sentimental.
His uncle had done ordinary good things.
Ordinary selfish things.
Funny things.
Annoying things.
Probably some things nobody knew.
He did not need redemption.
He had needed more room.

He wrote instead:
A PERSON IS MORE EVIDENCE THAN ONE STORY CAN HOLD.
He liked it.
Then distrusted liking it.
Kept it anyway.

The death changed family conversations temporarily.

Phone calls became more frequent.
People said:
"We have to stop only seeing each other at funerals."
Everyone agreed.
Then returned to their lives.
This happened every time.
The protagonist noticed the hypocrisy.
Then months later forgot to call someone.
There is the difficulty with noticing patterns.
Eventually you join one.

His father became briefly more expressive.
Not transformed.
One afternoon he told the protagonist:
"Call your brother."
"Why?"
"Because he's your brother."
"I saw him yesterday."
"So?"
The protagonist looked at him.
This was not really about his brother.
"All right."
Then his father:
"And call your mother when you're away."
"I do."
"More."
The protagonist smiled.
"Anything else?"
"Yeah. Don't be a pain in the ass."
"Too late."
His father almost smiled.

The protagonist called his brother that night from college.
His brother answered.
"What happened?"

"Nothing."
"Then why are you calling?"
"Dad said call you."
Silence.
Then:
"He's losing it."
"Probably."
"What do you want?"
"Nothing."
Another silence.
They stayed on the phone fifteen minutes.
Talking mostly nonsense.
This counted.

Baseball season intensified.
Death receded.
This felt cruel.
Then normal.
Then cruel again.
He had practice.
Games.
Assignments.
Ana.
Friends.
Money.
Sex.
Music.
Sleep.
His uncle remained dead while his life became busy.
No permission had been requested.

One afternoon during practice, he made an error.
Routine ball.
Booted it.
The old machinery started immediately.

Idiot.
Lazy feet.
You knew better.
What the fuck are you doing?
Then another ball came.
He fielded it.
Threw.
No drama.
His father's voice appeared:
You know what you did wrong?
Can you fix it?
Fix it.
The protagonist realized memory could preserve useful people too.
Not only indictments.

After the game, his coach said:
"Good recovery."
Two words.
The protagonist nodded.
He did not explain the error.
This was improvement so small it would be invisible to almost everyone.
Good.

A month later, another death.
Not family.
A student he vaguely knew.
Car accident.
Young.
This one hit differently.
Because the student had been in a dining hall three days earlier.
Alive.
Complaining.

Laughing.
Somebody said he had been drunk.
Somebody said the driver was drunk.
Someone else said no.
Seat belt.
No seat belt.
Speeding.
Rain.
No rain.
Rumors multiplied because uncertainty is unbearable and narrative dislikes vacant property.

The protagonist watched students tell the story.
Each version carried a moral.
Drinking.
Young people.
Bad roads.
Parents should have—
The school should have—
He should have—
People wanted cause because cause resembled control.
If death followed a mistake, then maybe correct behavior offered immunity.
The protagonist understood the attraction.

He also knew the world was not this cooperative.
A person could do everything right and still get hit by a bus.
A person could behave like an idiot for decades and die peacefully in bed at ninety-three.
Justice and mortality appeared not to be on speaking terms.

This disturbed him more than he expected.
He had been building a worldview around responsibility.
Choices matter.
Discipline matters.

Character matters.
All true enough.
Then death walked in carrying randomness.
Not contradiction exactly.
Scale.

He went to the library.
Looked for books on death.
Philosophy.
Religion.
Psychology.
Grief.
He read arguments for meaning.
Against meaning.
Afterlife.
No afterlife.
Acceptance.
Absurdity.
Faith.
Nature.
He wanted one to win.
None did.

He read late.
At some point he realized he was trying to research his way out of mortality.
He closed the book.
Looked around the library.
Rows.
Students.
Fluorescent light.
Someone coughing.
A girl asleep on her arms.
A guy eating something despite signs prohibiting food.
Nothing looked eternal.

This was oddly comforting.

He walked outside.
Cold.
Clear.
Stars barely visible through city light.
He looked up.
Immediately disliked himself for the cliché.
A death.
A young man.
Stars.
Very original.
He kept looking.

The universe was enormous.
He knew this intellectually.
Had known for years.
Numbers.
Distances.
Billions.
Light-years.
But scale occasionally moves from information into sensation.
He felt it.
Not spiritual.
Not exactly.
Small.
Ridiculously small.
His uncle.
The dead student.
Him.
Ana.
Manny.
His father crying alone in the kitchen.
Every argument he had ever considered important.

All of it happening on one piece of matter suspended in something no human mind could honestly picture.

His first reaction was:
Then nothing matters.
It lasted perhaps ten seconds.
Then:
That's stupid.
Because Ana mattered to him.
His parents mattered.
Manny.
Baseball tomorrow.
His body being cold mattered enough to put his hands in his pockets.
Maybe universal significance was an unnecessary standard.
Maybe something did not need to matter to the universe to matter.
The universe was not known for excellent judgment.

He smiled.
That line was going in the notebook.
Then stopped.
No.
Not yet.
He stood outside a little longer.

Later, in the dorm, he wrote only:
MY LIFE CAN MATTER TO ME WITHOUT MATTERING TO EVERYTHING.
He read it.
Then:
THAT MIGHT BE ENOUGH.
He almost crossed out might.
Left it.

Peter looked over.
"What are you writing?"
"Nothing."
"You're always writing nothing."
"Very productive genre."
Peter returned to his book.

The protagonist thought about his uncle's funeral.
Everybody improving the dead man.
His father crying where nobody could see.
Manny saying maybe accuracy was not the point.
Ana saying grief wasn't a job.
The dead student becoming a cautionary tale before anyone even knew what happened.
His own mind turning mortality into argument.
Always argument.

He began to suspect there were experiences that thought could accompany but not solve.
Love.
Grief.
Fear.
Maybe music.
Maybe baseball, though coaches would dispute this.
Thought could clarify.
Distort.
Help.
Hide.
Sometimes the mind was a flashlight.
Sometimes it was a man standing in front of the flashlight explaining darkness.

He did not write that sentence down.
The narrator did.
One of us has to keep working.

Near the end of the semester he went home again.
His father was at the kitchen table.
Not his chair.
Sorting papers.
Bills.
Insurance.
Something related to the dead uncle's estate had caused family discussion.
Forms.
Signatures.
Death had paperwork.
This offended the protagonist anew.

His father held up a document.
"You know what happens when you die?"
The protagonist smiled.
"Depends who you ask."
His father shook the paper.
"People gotta fill out bullshit."
The protagonist laughed.
"That's your philosophy?"
"That's reality."

Then his father said:
"Make sure your shit is in order."
"I'm eighteen."
"Exactly. You got nothing. Easy."
The protagonist laughed again.
His father looked at him.
Then, quieter:
"Don't leave people guessing."
The protagonist stopped.
He was not sure whether his father meant money.
Documents.

Love.
Apologies.
All of it.
He could have asked.
Didn't.

That night, he and Manny sat on the stoop.
Someone had a radio.
Music low.
Cars.
Warm air beginning.
A younger kid passed carrying a basketball.
Someone called after him.
The block continued producing futures without consulting the dead.

Manny said:
"You ever think about dying?"
The protagonist looked over.
"Why?"
"I don't know."
"You ask everybody that?"
"No."
"Good."
Manny waited.
The protagonist shrugged.
"Yeah."
"Scared?"
"Yeah."
Manny nodded.
"Me too."
That was it.
No theory.

After a while the protagonist said:

"I think the fucked-up part is you don't get to know what happens after you."
Manny looked at him.
"You mean heaven?"
"No. Like here. People."
"Oh."
"Like what people say. What they remember."
Manny smiled.
"You worried about your reviews?"
The protagonist laughed.
"Fuck you."
"Dead and still concerned with reputation."
"That's not what I mean."
"It is a little."
The protagonist considered.
"Yeah."

Manny leaned back.
"You'll be dead."
"Thank you."
"So who cares?"
"I care now."
"That's because you're not dead."
Difficult to argue.

The protagonist looked down the block.
Maybe memory was not something the dead owned.
Maybe it belonged entirely to the living.
That felt unfair.
Then obvious.

He thought of the uncle.
Never complained.
Would give you the shirt off his back.
Four hours.

Six hours.
Maryland.
Virginia.
A man becoming stories.
Not false exactly.
Incomplete.
All stories were.
Including this one.
Especially this one.

The protagonist glanced toward Manny.
"Remember California?"
Manny started laughing immediately.
"You fucking idiot."
"That was good."
"That was terrible."
"She believed me."
"For like ten minutes."
"Still."
"Your mother called you from the window."
"Minor issue."
They laughed.

The protagonist thought:
If I die, Manny will tell that story.
Then:
He'll tell it wrong.
Then:
I'll deserve that.
He laughed again.
Manny looked at him.
"What?"
"Nothing."

He did not open the notebook that night.

Somewhere in the apartment, his father snored.
His mother watched television.
His brother was out.
The pipes made noise.
A siren passed and kept going.
The protagonist lay in bed.
Alive.
Not metaphorically.
No larger meaning required.
Heart moving.
Air.
Room.
Time.
Enough.
For that night, enough.

Chapter 17

“The Trouble With a Good Sentence”

At eighteen, he began to discover that a sentence could be more convincing than the thought that produced it.
This was unfortunate because sentences were becoming the thing he did best.
Not best in the world.
Not best in school.
Not even reliably best in the room.
But well enough that people sometimes stopped talking when he read something aloud.
That was new.
And once a young man discovers he can make a room quiet, he begins to confuse silence with authority.

The assignment was supposed to be six pages.
He wrote fourteen.
This surprised no one.
The professor had asked the class to examine whether individual responsibility could be discussed honestly without ignoring the conditions under which people made choices.
The protagonist considered this almost insulting.
He had been preparing for this question since childhood without knowing it had an academic department.
He began confidently.
Poverty.

Race.
Schools.
Family.
Crime.
Work.
Luck.
Discipline.
Policy.
Culture.
He had examples.
Statistics.
Clippings.
Books.
Arguments he had been collecting for years.
He had his father.
His mother.
Manny.
Peter.
The Bronx.
Westchester.
Baseball.
Mr. Kaplan.
He had people who blamed systems for everything.
People who blamed individuals for everything.
He distrusted both.
Perfect.
He was going to fix the problem.

Three pages in, he realized fixing the problem would require more pages.
This also surprised no one.
He wrote late into the night.
The dorm became quiet.
Peter slept.

The protagonist sat under a lamp with books open around him and the particular arrogance available only to someone who has read enough to recognize complexity but not enough to fear it.
He wrote:
To deny agency is to deny dignity. To deny circumstance is to deny reality.
Then stopped.
Read it again.
Very good.
Too good.
He smiled.
There it was.
The sentence had arrived dressed for publication.
He did not yet know whether it was completely true.
That seemed temporarily less important.

He built the paper around it.
Not consciously.
Probably.
Evidence began arranging itself around the sentence like furniture around an expensive table.
Examples supporting it stayed.
Examples complicating it were included, but carefully.
No one could accuse him of ignoring opposition.
He had learned that lesson.
He simply made sure the opposition arrived politely and left on time.

The next afternoon Marcus found him in the library.
"You living here now?"
"Pretty much."
Marcus dropped into the chair across from him.
"What you working on?"
The protagonist handed him the first few pages.

Marcus read.
Not quickly.
This made the protagonist impatient.
He wanted reaction before evidence had finished entering the building.
Finally Marcus stopped at the line.
Agency.
Dignity.
Circumstance.
Reality.
He nodded.
"That's good."
The protagonist felt it immediately.
The hit.
"Yeah?"
"Yeah."
Marcus kept reading.
The protagonist tried to pretend he had returned to his own book.
He was not reading.
He was waiting.

A few minutes later Marcus looked up.
"Why you make the dude sound stupid?"
"What dude?"
"The guy you're arguing against."
"Which one?"
Marcus pointed.
The protagonist read the paragraph.
A scholar arguing that persistent poverty could not be understood primarily as a product of individual choices.
"I don't make him sound stupid."
"You kind of do."
"That's his argument."
"Is it?"

"Yes."
Marcus leaned back.
"You read the whole thing?"
The protagonist looked at him.
"Most of it."
Marcus laughed.
"Most?"
"The relevant parts."
"How you know what's relevant if you didn't read the whole thing?"
The protagonist felt irritation arrive with professional credentials.
"I read enough to understand the argument."
"Okay."
"Don't."
Marcus smiled.
"Don't what?"
"Do the okay thing."
"I didn't do anything."

The protagonist took the paper back.
"He minimizes personal responsibility."
Marcus shrugged.
"Maybe."
"No, he does."
"Then why you mad?"
"I'm not mad."
"You always say that when you're mad."
The protagonist turned to the book.
Conversation over.
Marcus remained seated.
This was irritating.

After a minute Marcus said:
"My uncle would love this shit."

The protagonist looked up.
"Why?"
"He says poor people stay poor because they make dumb decisions."
"That's not what I'm saying."
"I know."
"Then why'd you say he'd love it?"
"Because he'd hear that part."
The protagonist stared.
Marcus continued.
"My aunt would hate it."
"Why?"
"She'd hear the other part."
"What other part?"
"That people don't pick the whole situation."
The protagonist leaned back.
Marcus shrugged.
"Same paper."

This should have pleased him.
Nuance.
Multiple interpretations.
Reader freedom.
He had allegedly been working toward this.
Instead he felt misread twice by people who had not even read the paper.
One of whom did not exist in the room.
"That's because people hear what they want."
Marcus smiled.
"Maybe writers write what they want heard."
The protagonist stared at him.
"You're annoying."
"I learned from you."

He finished the paper anyway.

Fourteen pages became twelve.
Then eleven.
He removed three quotations, added two others, strengthened a section on structural inequality, softened a section on crime.
The central sentence remained.
It was too good to cut.

The professor returned the paper a week later.
A.
At the bottom:
Strong, ambitious, occasionally too pleased with its own balance.
The protagonist read that line three times.
Too pleased with its own balance.
He was offended.
Which made it difficult not to admire.
Below that:
You have a tendency to use complexity as a position rather than a method. Ask yourself whether you are examining tension or merely becoming attached to being the person who sees both sides.
There are comments students forget before reaching the hallway.
This was not one of them.

He went to office hours.
Of course.
The professor looked up as he entered.
"Here to discuss the grade?"
"No."
"Good."
"The comment."
"Also good."
The protagonist sat.

"What does 'attached to being the person who sees both sides' mean?"
The professor smiled slightly.
"You tell me."
"I hate when professors do that."
"I know."

The protagonist placed the paper on the desk.
"I thought the point was to avoid easy answers."
"It can be."
"So I avoided easy answers."
"Yes."
"Then?"
"Then you began sounding suspiciously certain that avoiding certainty made you wiser than people who chose."
The protagonist felt the attack instantly.
"I don't think that."
"You imply it."
"Where?"
The professor took the paper.
Found a passage.
Read a few lines silently.
Then:
"Here."
The protagonist read.
The passage described ideological certainty as comforting because it reduced the moral burden of contradiction.
He liked the paragraph.
Still.
"What's wrong with that?"
"Nothing necessarily."
"Then?"
The professor tapped the page.
"You give uncertainty moral prestige."
The protagonist stared.

"What does that even mean?"
"It means sometimes you treat not choosing as evidence of sophistication."
"That's not what I'm doing."
"Sometimes."
"I make arguments."
"Yes."
"I take positions."
"Yes."
"Then I'm not avoiding."
The professor nodded.
"Good."
This irritated him more.
"Good what?"
"Defend yourself."
"I am."
"Now ask whether you're defending the paper or investigating it."
There.
Again.
That fucking distinction.

The protagonist looked down.
The professor waited.
He hated waiting professors.
They made silence feel graded.
Finally he said:
"Maybe I like being the guy who says everybody's full of shit."
"Do you?"
"Sometimes."
"Why?"
He almost gave a polished answer.
Because binary thinking—

Because ideology—
Because people—
Stopped.
Rawer answer:
"Because then I don't have to be the dumbest guy in the room."
The professor's face changed.
Not dramatically.
Enough.
"That's more interesting."
The protagonist hated that too.

He leaned back.
"If everybody has blind spots, then I can't be uniquely stupid."
The professor said nothing.
"And if every position has contradictions, then I don't have to feel as bad when mine does."
Nothing.
"And if I can find the flaw in everybody's argument..."
He stopped.
The professor finished nothing for him.
Good.

The protagonist looked toward the window.
Students crossing campus.
One carried a tennis racket.
Someone else ran late.
A maintenance worker pushed a cart.
Ordinary movement.
No one outside cared that he was discovering a possible character defect.
This seemed increasingly rude of the world.

"So what am I supposed to do? Pick a side and become an asshole?"
The professor laughed.
"No."
"Then what?"
"Risk being wrong."
The protagonist looked back.
"That's it?"
"No. But it might keep you busy."

He left angry.
Not at the professor exactly.
At the problem.
Risk being wrong.
He risked being wrong constantly.
He was wrong all the time.
That was not the issue.
The issue was being wrong publicly.
Invested.
After choosing.
Without the escape hatch of:
It's complicated.

He carried the paper for the rest of the day.
At dinner Peter asked:
"Why do you have that thing with you?"
"What thing?"
"The paper."
"I just came from class."
"That was four hours ago."
"Mind your business."
Peter nodded.
"Very normal."

That weekend he went home.

Not because of the paper.
He would later connect them.
Memory likes continuity.
In reality his mother had called Wednesday and said his aunt was making food Sunday and if he was not coming home she needed to know because apparently rice required census information.
He went.

Manny met him Saturday night.
They walked.
No destination at first.
Then somebody mentioned a party in Washington Heights.
Then somebody else said it was dead.
Then someone had heard of something downtown.
Rumor still functioned as navigation.
Eventually they ended up at a small apartment party farther uptown than the protagonist usually admitted enjoying.
The room smelled like beer, fried food, perfume, cigarette smoke and too many coats.
Music moved between hip-hop and freestyle without asking anyone's permission.
The protagonist found this increasingly civilized.

A guy he knew vaguely from years earlier recognized him.
"College boy."
There it was.
The title.
"What's up?"
"You still playing ball?"
"Yeah."
"Still writing all that shit?"
The protagonist smiled.
"Yeah."
The guy laughed.

"Yo, this dude used to write everything down."
A few people turned.
The protagonist felt an old instinct.
Perform.

"What you write about?"
A woman asked.
He shrugged.
"People."
"That's vague."
"People are vague."
She smiled.
Good.
Audience.

Someone else asked:
"Politics?"
"Sometimes."
"Who you for?"
The question was casual.
The protagonist heard a referendum.
"For what?"
"President."
It was 1984.
Reagan.
Mondale.
The campaign existed everywhere.
Television.
Newspapers.
Kitchen tables.
Bars.
Barbershops.
People who knew policy.
People who knew only whether they liked the man's face.

People who would explain the national economy using one paycheck.
People who would explain foreign policy using one cousin in the military.
Democracy had broad admission standards.

The protagonist started with:
"It's complicated."
Manny, from across the room:
"Of course it is."
People laughed.
The protagonist smiled.
"Fuck you."
The guy who asked said:
"Nah, for real."
The protagonist looked around.
A room full of people.
Different ages.
Jobs.
Neighborhoods.
Some listening.
Some not.
He could give the balanced answer.
Reagan's appeal.
Inflation.
Crime.
Labor.
Race.
Foreign policy.
The Democrats.
Class.
Government.
The contradiction between individual responsibility and structural conditions.
He had material.

Too much.

Then someone said:
"Reagan don't give a fuck about people like us."
Another person immediately:
"None of them give a fuck about us."
A third:
"At least Reagan says what he means."
Someone laughed.
"That motherfucker is an actor."
"Exactly. He knows how to talk."
The room divided without actually dividing.
People remained holding the same cups.
Music continued.
Nobody declared civil war.

The protagonist said:
"I think Reagan's full of shit about some things."
There.
Position.
Small.
Specific enough.
The guy nodded.
"Like what?"
The protagonist named economic policy.
Cuts.
Who benefits.
Who absorbs risk.
He spoke.
Not perfectly.
Someone interrupted.
He answered.
Another person pushed back about taxes and jobs.
The protagonist conceded part.
Then argued another.

No escape to both sides.
He took positions.
Some survived.
Some didn't.

A man in his late twenties challenged him.
"You college kids always talk like people are stupid for wanting to keep their own money."
The protagonist bristled.
"I didn't say people are stupid."
"You implied it."
Professor's word.
He heard it.
This irritated him.
"I'm saying if you cut everything and then act shocked when schools or hospitals or neighborhoods fall apart, that's bullshit."
The man shook his head.
"Government wastes half the shit anyway."
"Probably."
"Then why give them more?"
"Because wasting some money doesn't mean the thing shouldn't exist."
"Easy for you. You paying taxes?"
The room laughed.
The protagonist smiled despite himself.
Fair shot.
"Not enough to complain like you."
More laughter.
The man smiled.
Good.
No humiliation.
They kept going.

The argument lasted maybe fifteen minutes.

No winner.
The protagonist left it with something unusual.
A position still intact but damaged around the edges.
He had not transcended the disagreement.
He had participated.
This felt less elegant.
More alive.

Outside later, Manny said:
"You were almost normal in there."
"Fuck you."
"No, seriously."
"What does that mean?"
"You actually said what you think."
"I always say what I think."
Manny stopped walking.
The protagonist stopped too.
Manny stared.
Then they both started laughing.

"You say what you think after you tell everybody what everybody else thinks."
"That's called context."
"That's called taking the scenic route."
They continued walking.

At the corner a car passed playing freestyle loudly.
The protagonist started singing part of it before remembering he was beside Manny.
Manny looked over.
The protagonist kept singing.
Badly.
"Don't look at me."
"I'm not saying anything."
"Your face is."

Manny laughed.
They kept walking.
A few blocks later hip-hop came from another car.
The protagonist liked that too.
No referendum.
Good night.

Sunday at his aunt's apartment, politics returned.
Naturally.
Family gatherings could convert dessert into policy within minutes.
An uncle praised Reagan.
Another cursed him.
Someone said Mondale would raise taxes.
Someone else said rich people should pay more.
A cousin complained about welfare.
Another relative pointed out someone in the family had used benefits after losing a job.
The room became louder.
The protagonist watched.
He could intervene.
Did.

"What if both—"
Manny was not there, but the sentence embarrassed him anyway.
He stopped.
His aunt looked at him.
"What?"
He changed course.
"I think people are mixing two different things."
"Here he goes."
His brother.
The protagonist ignored him.

He argued that a person could believe government programs were necessary and still criticize waste.
That someone could value personal responsibility without pretending everyone started with equal options.
That helping people did not require pretending choices were irrelevant.
That criticizing choices did not erase structural limits.
He heard his paper.
Agency.
Dignity.
Circumstance.
Reality.
There it was.

His uncle leaned back.
"College."
One word.
Dismissal.
The protagonist felt anger.
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"It means you got answers now."
"I don't have answers."
"You sound like you do."
His mother watched from the kitchen.
The protagonist looked toward her.
She gave nothing.

His uncle continued.
"You kids read books and think people are ideas."
That landed harder than intended.
Maybe.
The uncle was not a philosopher.
He worked long hours, complained about his knees, loved horse racing, distrusted politicians, lent money badly and held grudges efficiently.

He had not designed a thesis.
Still.
People are ideas.

The protagonist said:
"I don't think that."
His uncle shrugged.
"Good."
Conversation moved on.
Someone asked for coffee.
A child knocked over juice.
The political system survived.

Later his mother was washing dishes.
The protagonist helped.
Mostly because he wanted to ask something.
"What did he mean?"
"Who?"
"You know who."
She smiled.
"Your uncle?"
"Yeah."
"He thinks you talk too much."
"That's not what he meant."
"That too."
The protagonist dried a plate.
"Do I do that?"
"Talk too much?"
"Turn people into ideas."
His mother kept washing.
"Sometimes."
There it was.
No protection.

"Like when?"

She looked at him.
"You want examples?"
"Yes."
"You won't like them."
"That's fine."
"No, it's not."
"Ma."
She rinsed a glass.
Then:
"When I tell you somebody is having a hard time, sometimes you explain why."
He waited.
"So?"
"Sometimes I am not asking why."
"What are you asking?"
"I'm telling you they're having a hard time."
He stared at the towel in his hands.

She continued.
"Your cousin lost his job. You start talking about the economy. Your aunt is angry with her husband. You start talking about marriage. Somebody gets sick, you read about sickness."
"That's not bad."
"I didn't say bad."
The word.
Different.

"You like to understand things."
"Yeah."
"That's good."
He waited for the but.
It came.
"But sometimes understanding the thing is not the same as being with the person."

He looked at her.
She returned to the sink.
Done.

He thought of his uncle's funeral.
His father crying.
Ana.
Manny outside Limelight.
The professor.
Marcus.
People are ideas.
He disliked the convergence.
Too neat.
Life usually had better taste.

Back at college, he began writing something not assigned.
No heading.
No thesis at first.
Just a scene.
His mother washing dishes.
An uncle at the table.
People arguing politics.
A child spilling juice.
Someone reaching automatically for paper towels while continuing to argue about welfare.
The protagonist wrote the room.
Not what it meant.
Who sat where.
Who interrupted.
Who laughed.
Who repeated a story everyone had heard.
His mother's hands in dishwater.
His father's chair.
His brother eating before the food was fully served.

The uncle who distrusted government accepting a plate from the woman whose labor kept the gathering running.
No explanation.

He read it the next day.
Wanted to add interpretation.
Didn't.
Read again.
The scene was stronger without him.
This annoyed him.

A week later the campus literary magazine announced submissions.
He saw the flyer.
Walked past.
Came back.
Read it.
Walked away.
For two days he told himself he did not care.
On the third he submitted the family scene under his actual name.
Or the name we are still not giving you.
This is becoming childish.
I know.

He told no one.
Not Peter.
Not Marcus.
Not Ana.
Not even Manny.
Especially not Manny.
If rejected, no witness.
If accepted, he could reveal success after risk had passed.
This is called courage in several private autobiographies.

Three weeks later an envelope appeared in his campus mailbox.
He opened it standing there.
Accepted.
The piece would appear in the next issue.
He read the note twice.
Then a third time.
His first sensation was joy.
Clean.
Immediate.
Then pride.
Then the desire to tell everyone while pretending it was not important.
He went directly to the dorm.
Peter was there.
The protagonist tossed the letter onto his desk.
Casually.
Peter picked it up.
Read.
Looked at him.
"You submitted something?"
"Yeah."
"You didn't tell me."
"I forgot."
Peter stared.
"You're such an asshole."
The protagonist smiled.
"It's getting published."
Peter stood and hugged him.
This was not expected.
The protagonist laughed.
"Relax."
"Fuck you. That's cool."
"Yeah."
The word came out smaller than intended.

He was moved.
This embarrassed him.

He called home.
His mother answered.
"They're publishing something I wrote."
Silence.
Then:
"What?"
"In the school magazine."
Her voice rose.
"Your writing?"
"No, Ma. Somebody else's."
"Don't be smart."
She yelled for his father.
Then his brother.
The protagonist held the phone away from his ear.
Family celebration arrived noisily.
His father came on.
"What'd you write?"
"Just something."
"About what?"
"Family."
Pause.
"Don't put my business in there."
The protagonist laughed.
"Too late."
"How much they pay?"
"Nothing."
Another pause.
"Then why are we excited?"
From the background his mother yelled something at him.
His father laughed.
"Congratulations."
There.

Simple.
The protagonist held onto it.

He called Ana.
She was more excited than he expected.
"Read it to me."
"What?"
"Read it."
"No."
"Why?"
"It's not finished."
"They accepted it."
"Still."
"You are impossible."
He promised to send her a copy.
Then, after hanging up, reread the piece and immediately wanted to revise every line.
Recognition had converted writing into evidence.
Evidence could be judged.
Dangerous.

Publication day arrived.
The magazine was a thin thing.
Stapled.
Cheap paper.
His name in print.
There are writers who later pretend their first publication was minor.
Perhaps it was.
It does not feel minor when your name has never been printed under something you made.
He touched the page.
Actually touched it.
Then looked around to make sure nobody saw.

People read it.
Some said nothing.
A classmate said:
"That thing about your family was funny."
Another:
"It made me miss home."
A professor said:
"You finally got out of your own way."
He understood the compliment and resented its accuracy.
Marcus read it.
Then:
"This is better than your paper."
The protagonist stared.
"The paper got an A."
"I know."
"So?"
"This got people."
The phrase was not grammatical.
It was enough.

Manny received a copy in the mail.
The protagonist included no note.
A week later Manny called.
"I read your little story."
"Yeah?"
"You made everybody sound crazy."
"They are crazy."
"You too?"
"I'm not really in it."
Manny laughed.
"Exactly."
The protagonist smiled.
"Did you like it?"
Pause.
Too long.

Then:
"Yeah."
The protagonist tried to keep his voice neutral.
"All right."
Manny heard him.
"Oh, you wanted that bad."
"Shut up."
"You were waiting."
"Fuck you."
Manny laughed.
Then:
"You should've put the California shit in there."
"That's a different story."
"Blackie's manager."
"Goodbye."
He hung up while Manny was still laughing.

The publication did something dangerous.
It gave the protagonist evidence that his way of seeing could travel.
A stranger could read a room he remembered and feel something.
No argument required.
No victory.
No correction.
This thrilled him more than winning debates.
Which meant, naturally, he soon began wanting to win at this too.

He wrote more.
Some of it good.
Some of it unbearable.
One piece attempted to explain the entire American class system through a subway car.

Another used baseball as metaphor so aggressively that by page four every ground ball was carrying the burden of civilization.
He wrote about fathers.
Mothers.
Neighborhoods.
Fear.
Masculinity.
Race.
Money.
Belonging.
He wrote one sentence so pleased with itself that even he crossed it out.
Growth.

But another change had begun.
He was no longer only recording what he thought.
He was selecting.
Framing.
Leaving things out.
Moving details.
Combining conversations.
Protecting one person.
Exposing another.
Making a line funnier than memory guaranteed.
He noticed.
The difference between lying and writing became less comfortable.

One evening Peter read a draft.
"Did your uncle really say this?"
The protagonist looked.
"Basically."
"That's not what I asked."
"He said something like it."

"Something like this?"
"Close."
Peter smiled.
"So you made it better."
"I made it clearer."
"Uh-huh."
The protagonist took the pages back.
This was an old defense in new clothes.
He recognized the tailoring.

"What if the new version is more true?"
Peter stared.
"You sound dangerous."
"No, listen. Like if somebody says five things over an hour, and I compress them into one sentence that captures what they meant—"
"Then it's not what they said."
"I know."
"So write that."
"That ruins the scene."
Peter shrugged.
"Then you're choosing the scene."
There.
Again.
Selection.

That night the protagonist reread his published piece.
His family was there.
But arranged.
Cleaned.
Timed.
The child spilled juice at exactly the right moment.
Had that happened during the welfare argument?
He thought so.
Maybe before.

His uncle's line might have belonged to another dinner.
His mother's hand in dishwater was absolutely true.
Or true to many nights.
His father's chair.
True.
The laugh.
Probably.
The order?
Less certain.

The story felt true.
That frightened him more than if it felt false.

He closed the magazine.
Opened his notebook.
Started to write about memory.
Stopped.
For once the problem seemed larger than the sentence available.
Good.

He went outside.
Campus almost empty.
Cold.
A few windows lit.
Someone practicing trumpet badly in a distant building.
He walked without destination.
He thought about all the versions.
California.
Architecture.
Blackie's manager.
Bronx kid.
College kid.
Boyfriend.
Writer.

Athlete.
Son.
The guy who saw both sides.
The guy who had begun worrying that seeing both sides was another side.
All true.
Some false.
Most inconveniently mixed.

He had spent years asking:
Which version is me?
The question now seemed childish.
Not stupid.
Childish.
As though one correct self waited behind the others.
Maybe identity was less archaeology than maintenance.
What did you keep doing?
Who did you keep choosing?
What did you repair?
What did you repeat after knowing better?
Not a mask underneath masks.
A pattern.
He did not yet trust this thought.
Good.

The next morning he had practice.
He woke late.
For a moment the old machinery offered explanation.
Stayed up.
Couldn't sleep.
Writing.
Cold.
Alarm failed.
Then he saw the clock.
"Fuck."

He got dressed.
Ran.
No philosophy.

He arrived three minutes late.
Coach looked at him.
"You're late."
"Yeah."
No explanation.
The coach pointed toward the field.
"Run."
He ran.

Halfway through the first lap, the protagonist began thinking about how accepting consequence without explanation might represent—
Then he caught himself.
"Jesus Christ."
Marcus, running nearby, looked over.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Good."
They kept running.

The morning was cold.
His lungs hurt.
The field smelled like damp dirt.
Somebody laughed near the dugout.
The coach yelled.
A ball hit leather.
The protagonist ran another lap.
No metaphor.
For almost the entire turn around center field, no metaphor.
This may have been his greatest accomplishment of the semester.

Nobody knew.
That helped.

Chapter 18

“The World Refuses to Cooperate”

The first time he realized college could make him poorer, he was standing in front of a washing machine.
Not intellectually poorer.
Not spiritually.
Actually poorer.
Two quarters short.
He checked both pockets. Then the little pocket inside the larger pocket. Then his jacket.
Nothing.
Behind him, another student waited with a plastic basket full of clothes.
“You using that?”
“Yeah.”
The student looked at the open washer.
Then at him.
“Looks like you’re negotiating.”
“I’m short fifty cents.”
The student reached into his pocket and held out two quarters.
The protagonist stared at them.
“I’m good.”
“You just said you’re short.”
“I got it.”
The old phrase.
The student shrugged and put the quarters away.
“Okay.”

The protagonist searched his pockets again.
Apparently he believed money could be persuaded to appear through conviction.
It could not.
“Actually.”
The student looked over.
“You still got those quarters?”
He handed them to him.
No smile. No pity.
The protagonist fed the machine.
It started.
That should have been the end of it.
It wasn't.
“Yo.”
The student turned.
“I’ll get you back.”
“Relax.”
“No, seriously.”
“I believe you.”
He returned to his laundry.
The protagonist sat in a plastic chair and watched his clothes rotate behind glass.
Fifty cents.
The previous night he had spent several dollars on beer without noticing.
Money disappeared differently depending on what it purchased.
Beer left socially.
Laundry collected testimony.

He found work off campus.
A small place where a man named Sal handled deliveries, stock and whatever else required hands.
The protagonist's job title changed depending on who asked.
To his father: work.

To Ana: something part time.
To strangers at parties: “I help run inventory for a place off campus.”
This was technically true in the same way that holding the flashlight made you part of the construction crew.
Sal called him College.
“College, grab those.”
“College, you know how to count?”
“College, this ain't a library.”
The protagonist disliked him for approximately three weeks.
Sal seemed indifferent to the campaign.
He was short and broad and smoked beside the back door.
He had two daughters, one in nursing school, one still living at home. He could repair nearly anything mechanical and admitted without shame that his wife handled their bills because he was terrible with money.
The protagonist found this strangely impressive.
Most men he knew treated incompetence as classified information.
One afternoon he came to work angry.
Ana.
Not even a real fight.
A phone call.
Distance.
Something she said. Something he heard.
He stacked boxes harder than necessary.
Sal watched for a while.
“Girl?”
The protagonist stopped.
“How does everybody know?”
“You’re eighteen.”
“So?”
Sal shrugged.
“What else you mad about?”
“Plenty.”

“Sure.”
The protagonist went back to the boxes.
A minute later Sal said:
“You know what kills you kids?”
“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”
“You think feelings are instructions.”
The protagonist looked over.
“What does that mean?”
“You’re mad, somebody must’ve done something wrong. You're scared, something bad must be happening. You're jealous, somebody owes you an explanation.”
Sal lit a cigarette.
“You people believe every feeling like it came notarized.”
“You don't?”
“I believe I'm hungry. That one got a good record.”
The protagonist laughed.
“So what are feelings for?”
Sal looked genuinely confused.
“What do you mean what are they for?”
“What do you do with them?”
“Have them.”
“That’s it?”
“What else you want? A union?”
Sal pointed toward the boxes.
The conversation was over.

That night the protagonist called Ana.
She talked about school. Her mother. A professor she disliked.
Then Daniel entered the conversation.
The protagonist felt jealousy before he had time to assemble a position about jealousy.
There it was.
Hot and stupid.
He waited.

Nothing happened.
The feeling remained.
Interesting.
Ana continued talking.
Eventually she stopped.
“You okay?”
“Yeah.”
He almost left it there.
“Actually, I'm a little jealous.”
Silence.
“What?”
“I said I'm a little jealous.”
“I heard you.”
“Okay.”
“That’s it?”
“Yeah.”
“You’re not going to ask me twenty questions?”
“No.”
“Are you sick?”
“Probably.”
She laughed.
Then they kept talking.
The world had failed to punish him for admitting weakness.
Suspicious.

Money became louder as the semester went on.
Books.
Laundry.
Train fare.
Food outside the meal plan.
Phone calls.
Baseball equipment.
Dates.
A haircut.
A shirt.

Another shirt because the first shirt made it obvious you owned one shirt.
Students with money rarely announced it.
They simply did things without discussing whether the thing could be done.
Peter's stereo stopped working properly.
A week later a new one arrived.
The protagonist watched him unpack it.
“Your parents bought you another stereo?”
“Yeah.”
“Just like that?”
Peter looked up.
“The old one broke.”
“That’s what I mean.”
“What do you mean?”
The protagonist had no good answer.
In his house, a broken stereo first became a repair project. Then an investigation into who broke it. Then a debate over whether a stereo was necessary. Replacement might occur later if the household economy survived.
“Nothing.”
Peter looked at him.
“You want the old one?”
The protagonist's face betrayed him.
“Does it work?”
“Mostly.”
“How much?”
“Nothing.”
“No.”
“Why no?”
“I’ll give you something.”
Peter stared at him.
“This is becoming weird.”
The protagonist gave him twenty dollars.
Peter tried to return ten.

He refused.
Both men ended the transaction slightly irritated.
The stereo crossed approximately eight feet of dormitory floor and changed social class along the way.

He began noticing money everywhere.
Not because it had suddenly appeared.
Because he had.
Two students discussed spring break.
Florida.
The Bahamas.
Somebody's parents had a place.
Flights.
Cars.
The conversation contained no visible money.
Only plans.
One of them turned to him.
“You doing anything?”
“Probably New York.”
“Cool.”
That was it.
No insult.
No hierarchy.
He supplied those himself.
For the next hour he felt poor.
Later that evening he spoke to a kid from home who asked about college and said:
“Must be nice.”
The protagonist almost answered defensively.
Then heard the symmetry.
He let it go.

Around this time another Latino student gave him useful advice.
Or what the student believed was useful advice.

They were eating together after class. The conversation moved from professors to women to parties, as conversations between young men have occasionally done without academic supervision.
The other student had been at the school longer.
He knew things.
Which parties were worth going to.
Which bars looked harder at IDs.
Which professors liked participation.
Which women supposedly liked athletes.
Which people mattered.
Then, casually:
“Stay away from townies.”
The protagonist looked up.
“Townies?”
“Yeah.”
“What the fuck is a townie?”
The student laughed.
“People from around here.”
“Around where?”
“Here.”
He gestured vaguely beyond campus.
“Locals.”
The word did considerable work.
The protagonist waited.
“What's wrong with locals?”
The student shrugged.
“Nothing. Just trust me.”
“Girls too?”
“Especially.”
“Why?”
The student smiled.
“Different shit, man.”
“What shit?”
“You'll see.”

The protagonist hated advice that claimed sophistication through missing nouns.
“Like what?”
“Drama. People hanging around campus. They know students got money. They want to get into shit. Guys starting shit. Girls trying to meet college dudes. Whatever.”
He lowered his voice slightly.
“You just don't need it.”
The protagonist nodded.
Not because he entirely agreed.
Because he understood the category.
There were students.
And there were people around students.
Inside.
Outside.
College.
Town.
He had been in enough rooms to recognize a border when somebody handed him one.
The student was Latino.
That mattered to the protagonist for about five minutes because he had still not learned that people belonging to one category were fully capable of inventing others.
He finished eating.
The conversation moved on.

A few weeks later he went to his grandmother's apartment in Manhattan.
She lived on 109th Street.
Dominican.
Her apartment had never seemed to him like evidence of anything.
It was simply where his grandmother lived.
The building.
The hallway.

The familiar furniture.
The television louder than necessary.
Food appearing whether he had requested it or not.
A refrigerator containing reused containers whose current contents could not be predicted from their labels.
Her neighborhood belonged to the enormous category called normal because childhood had placed it there.
He stayed overnight.
The next afternoon he walked toward Broadway.
Columbia was nearby.
He had been around the neighborhood before, of course.
But now he was a college student himself.
That changed the optics.
He noticed the women.
Jesus Christ.
They seemed to be everywhere.
Women carrying books.
Women sitting on steps.
Women walking in groups.
Women who appeared beautiful and intelligent simultaneously, which at eighteen he regarded as a particularly unfair concentration of resources.
One wore a long coat and carried several books against her chest.
Another was arguing with a man while holding coffee.
A third passed him speaking about something he did not understand.
He was immediately in love with all three.
Not seriously.
His standards for temporary emotional commitment were flexible.
He slowed near campus.
Students moved around him.
Some looked wealthy.
Some didn't.

Some probably were.
Some were undoubtedly financing the entire experience through combinations of loans, work, parental sacrifice and optimism.
He knew none of this.
He saw Columbia.
The name itself did work.
Buildings.
Books.
Beautiful women.
Possibility.
He imagined conversations.
Naturally he improved himself for them.
In one imagined version he attended Columbia.
In another he was visiting friends.
In another he was a writer working on something downtown.
Architecture remained available if necessary.
Then the word returned.
Townie.
He stopped walking.
His grandmother lived on 109th Street.
He looked back in the direction of her building.
Then toward Columbia.
Then back.
“Oh, fuck you.”
Nobody nearby knew why.
He laughed.
From the perspective of those beautiful, brilliant Columbia women he had just spent several minutes admiring, he was standing outside their university after leaving his Dominican grandmother's apartment a few blocks away.
Local.
Neighborhood.
Not student.
Townie.

He disliked this immediately.
Which was interesting because several weeks earlier the word had sounded almost useful.

His grandmother had no idea she had become central to an argument about class.
She was making food.
He returned to the apartment.
“You hungry?”
“No.”
She put food in front of him.
The matter was settled.
He sat.
She asked about school.
He told her it was good.
She asked about baseball.
Good.
His mother.
Good.
His father.
Good.
His brother.
Good.
The protagonist had spent years developing increasingly complicated ideas and remained capable of summarizing his entire family with one adjective.
His grandmother watched him eat.
He thought about townies.
Then about telling her.
Did not.
What would he say?
Abuela, congratulations. According to a guy at college, you live among the inferior locals.
She would probably ask whether he wanted more rice.
This seemed the superior response.

Later he went outside again.
Partly to walk.
Partly because Columbia remained populated by women.
Self-knowledge has limits.
He stood near a bookstore window.
A group of students passed.
One woman smiled in his direction.
He smiled back.
He immediately considered whether she had smiled at him or at someone behind him.
He did not check.
Hope occasionally benefits from poor methodology.
For the next block he imagined speaking to her.
Then imagined her asking where he went to school.
There it was.
He could tell the truth.
He attended college elsewhere and was visiting his grandmother on 109th Street.
Perfectly respectable.
He knew this.
Still, he could feel the temptation to improve it.
Why?
Because Columbia had turned the geography of his grandmother's apartment into status information.
Nothing about the apartment had changed.
Nothing about his grandmother.
Nothing about him.
Only the audience.
He walked another block.

The revelation did not make him instantly sympathetic toward every person ever called a townie.
That would have been suspiciously efficient.
His first instinct was narrower.

I'm not that kind of townie.
Then he heard himself.
There it was.
Human progress, crawling on its stomach.
He laughed.

Back at school, he saw the Latino student again.
They were walking out of a building.
“Yo.”
“What’s up?”
The protagonist considered mentioning 109th Street.
Didn't.
Not yet.
Instead:
“You still staying away from townies?”
The student laughed.
“Hell yeah.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Good luck with that.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
He walked away.
For once he did not need to win the argument.
Partly because he had not yet figured out what the argument was.

Class became more difficult after that.
Not the work.
The rooms.
He began hearing words differently.
Merit.
Opportunity.
Culture.
Choice.
Privilege.

Work ethic.
Community.
Words people used as though everyone had agreed where their borders were.
One afternoon a student argued that merit should determine outcomes.
Another said merit reflected unequal preparation.
A third brought up inherited wealth.
The professor let them go.
The protagonist listened.
Longer than usual.
Finally:
“What if merit is real and unequal at the same time?”
Someone across the table rolled his eyes.
“Here comes both sides.”
The room laughed.
The protagonist did too.
He had earned this.
“No, seriously.”
He leaned forward.
“If somebody works harder than me and gets better at something, pretending that doesn't matter because we started different is bullshit. But pretending where we started doesn't matter is also bullshit.”
The student looked at him.
“So what do you do?”
There.
The question he preferred other people not ask.
He could identify contradictions all day.
Solutions were less cooperative.
“I don't know.”
The student laughed.
“Exactly.”
The protagonist felt it.
Old reflex:

attack.
Instead he nodded.
“Yeah.”
The laughter faded.
“Exactly.”
He sat back.
The professor said nothing.
Someone else spoke.
The discussion moved on without resolving civilization.

At work Sal was unloading boxes.
The protagonist joined him.
“College.”
“Yeah.”
“You ever gonna graduate?”
“Probably.”
“That's encouraging.”
They worked.
After a while Sal said:
“My daughter got into nursing school.”
The protagonist stopped.
“That's great.”
“Yeah.”
Sal smiled.
Then didn't.
The protagonist saw the rest.
“How much?”
Sal looked over.
“Too fucking much.”
The protagonist laughed.
“You gonna do it?”
“What kind of question is that?”
Sal lifted another box.
“She got in.”
That was the answer.

The protagonist nearly began talking about financial aid.
Loans.
Tuition.
Government assistance.
The cost of education.
He could already hear himself.
Instead he grabbed the other end of the box.
They carried it inside.

His own schedule became impossible.
Practice.
Work.
Classes.
Reading.
Writing.
Ana.
Calls home.
Laundry.
Sleep.
Eating.
The body kept requesting maintenance despite his intellectual schedule.
He bought a cheap calendar.
Wrote everything down.
For three days he followed it perfectly.
On the fourth, Sal needed him late.
Practice ran over.
A professor moved a deadline.
Ana called while he was studying and sounded hurt when he said he had to go.
By midnight his beautifully organized week resembled a document recovered after a small war.
He stared at the boxes.
Monday.
Tuesday.

Wednesday.
Reality had not signed the agreement.

His father called.
This was unusual.
His mother normally handled telephone diplomacy.
“You eating?”
“Yes.”
“You got money?”
Pause.
“Yes.”
“That's not what I asked.”
The protagonist smiled.
“I’m okay.”
“You need?”
“No.”
“You sure?”
“Yeah.”
His father waited.
Then:
“Don't be stupid.”
“What does that mean?”
“If you need twenty dollars, ask for twenty dollars. Don't spend thirty proving you didn't need twenty.”
The protagonist stared at the receiver.
His father had become annoyingly quotable.
“I’m good.”
“Okay.”
Then they talked baseball.

Two weeks later the protagonist needed twenty dollars.
Actually needed it.
Train fare home.
A book had cost more than expected.
Sal's paycheck would not arrive until Monday.

His mother expected him Friday night.
He considered not going.
Then considered saying practice changed.
Then a professor.
Then work.
Three lies with respectable employment histories.
He sat on the edge of his bed.
Called home.
His father answered.
“Hello?”
“Yo.”
“What’s up?”
“I’m short.”
Silence.
“For the train.”
“How much?”
“Twenty.”
“All right.”
No judgment.
“I can pay you back Monday.”
His father laughed.
“You gonna mail me twenty dollars?”
“I can.”
“Shut up.”
His father arranged for the money to reach him through somebody traveling up.
Then:
“You eating?”
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
“Okay.”
The protagonist hung up.
Relief came first.
Shame second.

Anger at the shame third.
He was getting very efficient at emotional administration.

When he arrived home Friday, his mother fed him.
He noticed the refrigerator.
Food.
Milk.
Eggs.
Leftovers.
Fruit.
Things appearing because somebody bought them.
The apartment was warm.
Soap existed.
Toilet paper.
Electricity.
His childhood had treated these things as natural resources.
College had introduced invoices.
His mother saw him looking into the refrigerator.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You hungry?”
“No.”
She closed the door.
“Then stop paying Con Edison.”
He laughed.

That evening his father was at the table with bills.
The protagonist sat across from him.
“How much is the electric bill?”
His father looked up.
“Why?”
“I don't know.”
“You paying it?”
“No.”
“Then enjoy your life.”

“How much?”
His father told him.
The protagonist asked about rent.
Food.
Insurance.
His father answered two more questions.
Then stopped.
“What is this?”
“Nothing.”
“No. What?”
“I’m just asking.”
His father leaned back.
“You think about money too much.”
The protagonist stared.
“You're sitting in front of bills.”
“That's why I think about money. You don't have bills.”
“College costs money.”
“I know.”
“Everything costs money.”
His father smiled.
“Now you got it.”
“That's it?”
“What you want, a diploma?”

His mother entered.
“What are you two doing?”
“He's auditing me.”
“I’m asking questions.”
She looked at her husband.
“Don't tell him everything.”
“Why?”
“Because then he'll make a chart.”
Both men started laughing.
The protagonist's mother continued toward the kitchen.
Case closed.

Ana came over later.
They walked.
Passed a restaurant he had wanted to try.
White tablecloths.
Wine glasses.
People who seemed to know how to order things without looking at the right side of the menu first.
Ana stopped.
“Want to go?”
He looked at the prices posted outside.
“No.”
“You sure?”
“Yeah.”
She studied him.
“Too expensive?”
The old exits appeared.
Not hungry.
Place looks stupid.
Already ate.
Not worth it.
He stayed where he was.
“Yeah.”
Ana nodded.
“Okay.”
They walked another block and bought slices.
Ate standing up.
He enjoyed himself.
This irritated him slightly.
Honesty was supposed to require more ceremony.

Later, sitting on his bed, Ana said:
“You act different at school.”
He felt defensive before the sentence finished arriving.
“How?”

“I don't know.”
“Different how?”
“More on.”
“What does that mean?”
“You know.”
“No.”
She looked around his room.
“You perform more.”
“For who?”
“Everybody.”
“That's bullshit.”
Ana shrugged.
“Okay.”
He paced once.
“This is college. Obviously I'm different there. Different people. Different place.”
“I didn't say fake.”
“You implied it.”
“No. You heard it.”
He stopped.
That sounded familiar.

Ana watched him.
“You like being impressive there.”
“Everybody likes being impressive.”
“Probably.”
“So?”
“So nothing.”
He hated observations that refused to prosecute.
She leaned back.
“I think you're happier there sometimes.”
That hurt differently.
“I’m happy here.”
“I know.”
“Then what are you saying?”

“Maybe you're also happy there.”
He sat.
For reasons he could not explain, this felt disloyal.
To the Bronx.
His parents.
Manny.
Ana.
Perhaps even his grandmother on 109th Street.
He had grown up believing leaving was achievement.
Nobody had warned him achievement might occasionally feel like accusation.

The semester ended without catastrophe.
Which did not mean well.
A grade lower than expected.
A baseball slump.
Less money than he wanted.
Ana and he arguing more.
His father tired.
His mother worried about things she did not fully explain.
Sal cutting hours.
Nothing large enough to become a story by itself.
Five small problems arriving without regard for one another.
He had imagined adversity as an event.
A pitch.
A fight.
A death.
A decision.
Something with edges.
Instead life could become difficult through accumulation.
No villain required.

He went home for summer carrying a bag of dirty clothes.
His mother opened it.
“Jesus Christ.”

“I was busy.”
“You were dirty.”
“Same thing.”
She shook her head.

The neighborhood had moved while he was away.
A store closed.
Another opened.
Someone had a baby.
Someone had disappeared into drugs.
Someone he remembered as a kid was working construction.
Another guy had a car now.
A girl he had once wanted barely remembered him.
The protagonist had spent months learning about society.
Society had neglected to wait.

Manny was on the stoop.
Same stoop.
Different year.
He looked at the laundry bag.
“College kick you out?”
“Summer.”
“Shame.”
They shook hands and then hugged briefly, because affection between young men often required disguises.
Manny sat.
The protagonist sat beside him.
“How's the philosopher?”
“Broke.”
“Finally something relatable.”
The protagonist laughed.

They talked.
Work.
School.

Baseball.
Ana.
Money.
Not everything.
Enough.
A delivery truck stopped in the middle of the street.
Someone behind it leaned on the horn.
The driver yelled.
The other man yelled back.
A woman leaned out a second-floor window.
“Both of you shut the fuck up!”
Neither did.
Manny watched.
“There’s your political science.”
The protagonist laughed.

A younger kid farther down the block missed a catch.
The ball rolled toward the street.
The protagonist stood automatically.
Stopped it with his foot.
Picked it up.
Threw it back.
The kid caught it.
“Thanks.”
He nodded.
Sat again.
Manny looked over.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“What?”
“You looked like you were gonna write something.”
The protagonist laughed.
“I wasn't.”
“Good.”
They watched the kids play.

After a while the protagonist said:
“You know what a townie is?”
Manny looked at him.
“A what?”
“Townie.”
“Sounds like some white people shit.”
The protagonist laughed.
“No. Somebody at school told me to stay away from townies.”
“Why?”
“Locals.”
Manny stared at him.
“Locals?”
“Yeah.”
“Like us?”
The protagonist started laughing.
“Exactly.”
Manny looked genuinely delighted.
“Wait. College people got a word for regular motherfuckers?”
“Apparently.”
“And you listened?”
“For like two weeks.”
Manny slapped his knee.
“You stupid motherfucker.”
“I know.”
“Townie.”
“Shut up.”
Manny pointed toward him.
“Yo, Townie.”
“Fuck you.”
“Professor Townie.”
The protagonist was laughing hard now.
Manny had found a weapon that would remain operational for years.

The protagonist told him about his grandmother.
109th Street.
Columbia.
The women.
The moment the category flipped.
Manny listened.
Then:
“So basically you only realized it was fucked up because you wanted to fuck Columbia girls.”
The protagonist stopped laughing.
“That is an incredibly reductive interpretation.”
“Is it wrong?”
Pause.
“No.”
Manny nodded.
“Education.”
They sat there laughing.

A car passed.
Music loud.
Freestyle.
The protagonist knew the song.
He liked it.
Manny looked over.
“Townie music.”
“Fuck you.”
The protagonist kept listening.
No defense.

He had spent years believing knowledge would reduce confusion.
College was doing the opposite.
Every answer seemed to create additional defendants.
Money looked different depending on the room.

Class changed depending on which side of the gate you stood.
Home could be privilege from one direction and limitation from another.
A grandmother's apartment could be simply home until a university three blocks away turned geography into status.
A man could borrow fifty cents for laundry and still possess advantages he did not see.
A student could be poor among classmates and rich among cousins.
A Latino kid could warn another Latino kid about the wrong kind of locals.
A Bronx boy could laugh at the category until Columbia made him one.
The protagonist had explanations for all of this.
Naturally.
But sitting beside Manny, he did not use them.
A basketball bounced somewhere behind them.
Someone called for a kid to come upstairs.
A bus groaned at the corner.
Manny nudged him.
“Yo.”
“What?”
“You owe me fifty cents.”
“For what?”
“Laundry.”
“How the fuck do you know about that?”
“I don't.”
Manny smiled.
“But look at your face.”
The protagonist shook his head.
“Asshole.”
“Townie.”
The protagonist laughed.
The city continued around them.

No thesis.
No resolution.
Just the uncomfortable possibility that every border looked permanent until you found yourself standing on the other side.

Chapter 19

“Two Ears”

The woman had been talking for perhaps four minutes when he interrupted her for the third time.
She stopped.
Not dramatically.
She simply stopped speaking and looked at him.
The protagonist, having successfully obtained the floor, continued.
This was the first indication that he had no idea what had just happened.
“No, because what I’m saying is—”
“I know what you’re saying.”
“Right, but—”
“I know.”
They were sitting in a coffee shop near campus. The woman’s name was Rachel. She was in one of his classes, although they had become friends mostly because they kept leaving class arguing about whatever had happened inside it.
Rachel was smart.
He liked smart women.
More accurately, he liked smart women right up until their intelligence became administratively inconvenient.
She had been telling him about her father.
He had heard every word.
Her father drank.
Not constantly.
Enough.

Her parents fought.
Her mother had threatened to leave before and had recently started saying it again.
Rachel had gone home the previous weekend and found her father asleep in a chair in the middle of the afternoon. Her mother was upstairs packing a suitcase.
The protagonist had listened carefully.
He asked whether the father had lost his job.
No.
Whether money was a problem.
Not really.
Whether he became violent.
No.
Whether he had always drunk this much.
Rachel wasn't sure.
Whether her mother had somewhere to go.
Probably her sister's.
Whether—
Rachel looked at him.
“Why are you interviewing me?”
He leaned back.
“I’m not.”
“You are.”
“I’m trying to understand.”
“I didn't ask you to understand.”
He frowned.
That seemed unreasonable.
“What am I supposed to do?”
Rachel stared at him.
“Nothing.”
He laughed.
She didn't.

He had always thought listening was one of his strengths.
This belief was supported by considerable evidence.

He remembered things.
Exact things.
Words.
Tone.
Who said what.
Where people were standing.
Contradictions between what somebody said Tuesday and what they claimed Friday.
He could reconstruct an argument days later with the confidence of a court stenographer who had also represented one of the parties.
People often told him things.
This seemed decisive.
Why would people tell him things if he wasn't a good listener?
There were weaknesses in this methodology.
He had not yet located them.

Rachel stirred her coffee.
He waited.
He was listening now.
Properly.
She said:
“My mother called me last night.”
He nodded.
“She was crying.”
He nodded again.
“She said she doesn't know what to do.”
The protagonist remained silent.
Excellent.
Listening.
“She keeps saying she's going to leave, and then she doesn't. And I get mad at her for not leaving, and then I feel like shit because it's her life.”
He nodded.

Rachel looked at him.
He maintained silence.
She continued.
“And my dad calls me separately and acts like nothing's happening.”
More silence.
“And then I start wondering if maybe my mother exaggerates things because she does sometimes, and then I feel like I'm betraying her just for thinking that.”
The protagonist nodded.
He was doing extremely well.
Rachel stopped.
He waited.
A few seconds passed.
Then:
“You can talk.”
“Oh.”
She almost smiled.
He had confused listening with hostage protocol.

“I don't know what to say.”
“That's okay.”
This was unsettling.
“You want my opinion?”
“No.”
The answer came too quickly.
He laughed.
“Damn.”
Rachel smiled.
“I know your opinion.”
“How?”
“You already gave me six of them.”
“Fair.”
She took a drink.
He sat.

After a while she said:
“I just hate going home now.”
He nearly said:
Then don't.
Simple.
Actionable.
Efficient.
He swallowed it.
Rachel looked toward the window.
“My little sister is still there.”
That changed things.
The protagonist's mind immediately began rebuilding the problem.
Age of sister?
Could she stay somewhere?
What was the father's drinking pattern?
Was there family nearby?
Did the mother have money?
He felt questions lining up.
For once he noticed them before they left.
He said:
“That sucks.”
Rachel looked at him.
“Yeah.”
Nothing else.
They sat there.
A spoon hit a saucer somewhere behind them.
The coffee shop door opened and cold air entered.
Rachel rubbed her hands together.
Then she started talking again.

He learned more in the next twenty minutes than he had during the first ten.
Not because he asked better questions.

Because she stopped having to defend the story from his solutions.
Her father was funny.
That surprised him.
He had already cast the man.
Drunk father.
Problem.
Rachel described him making pancakes badly on Sundays and singing songs with incorrect lyrics because it annoyed his daughters.
She loved him.
That complicated things.
Her mother was not simply suffering.
She could be cruel when angry.
That complicated things.
Her father sometimes stopped drinking for months.
More complication.
Her sister defended him.
Her mother resented that.
Rachel sometimes wished her parents would divorce.
Sometimes the thought terrified her.
Sometimes she wanted to go home and fix everything.
Sometimes she deliberately stayed at school and didn't answer the phone.
Nothing arranged itself.
The protagonist listened.
Actually listened for stretches.
Then lost it.
Returned.
Lost it again.

Finally Rachel said:
“I feel like a terrible daughter.”
The protagonist answered immediately.
“You're not.”

She looked at him.
He knew from her face that he had done something wrong.
Again.
“What?”
“How do you know?”
He paused.
“Because—”
“No. How do you know?”
He had evidence.
She cared.
She worried.
She went home.
She answered calls.
She loved her sister.
All evidence for the defense.
But that wasn't what Rachel had asked.
Or perhaps it was not what she needed.
“I don't.”
She nodded.
The protagonist waited.
Rachel's eyes filled.
She looked down.
“I think sometimes I am.”
He wanted badly to remove the sentence from her.
Instead he sat there.
A minute later she wiped her face.
“Sorry.”
“For what?”
She shrugged.
He handed her a napkin.

When they left, Rachel hugged him.
Longer than usual.
“Thanks.”
The protagonist was confused enough to be honest.

“I didn't do anything.”
“I know.”
She walked toward her dorm.
He stood there.
This was not how gratitude was supposed to work.

At work the next afternoon Sal was opening boxes with a knife.
The protagonist was unusually quiet.
Sal noticed.
“You sick?”
“No.”
“Girl?”
“No.”
“Money?”
“No.”
“Then you're sick.”
The protagonist smiled.
They worked.
After a while he said:
“You think you're a good listener?”
Sal didn't look up.
“No.”
The protagonist waited.
Nothing.
“That's it?”
Sal sliced another box.
“You asked.”
“Why aren't you?”
“I get bored.”
The protagonist laughed.
At least the man was honest.

“My friend said I don't listen.”
“Probably don't.”

“You don't even know.”
“I know you.”
“You barely know me.”
Sal looked up.
“See?”
The protagonist stared.
Sal went back to the box.

“My grandmother used to say you got two ears and one mouth for a reason.”
The protagonist groaned immediately.
Sal looked over.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No. What?”
“That's one of those sayings that sounds profound until you think about it.”
Sal stared.
The protagonist continued, because evidence of failure rarely prevented continuation.
“I mean anatomically it doesn't make sense. You have two eyes too. Ten fingers. One nose. It doesn't mean you're supposed to smell half as much as you—”
Sal started laughing.
“What?”
“You're doing it.”
“Doing what?”
“I give you a saying about listening and you argue with your grandmother's anatomy.”
“Your grandmother.”
“Even worse. You never met the woman and you're correcting her.”
The protagonist laughed.
“I'm just saying it's a stupid saying.”
Sal nodded.

“Maybe.”
Then:
“You still don't listen.”
The protagonist shook his head.
“Fuck you.”
“Two ears, College.”

He told Ana about it on the phone.
She became suspiciously quiet.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No. What?”
“I’m enjoying this.”
“Enjoying what?”
“Somebody else telling you.”
The protagonist smiled.
“I listen to you.”
Ana laughed.
Not a small laugh.
A full one.
“Oh, fuck you.”
“I’m sorry.”
“No you're not.”
“No, I'm really sorry. That came out.”
“Do I really not listen?”
Ana stopped laughing.
There are questions people ask expecting reassurance.
This was one.
She did not provide it.
“Sometimes.”
He waited.
“How?”
“You hear me.”
“That sounds like listening.”
“No.”

“What’s the difference?”
Ana sighed.
He heard the sigh and immediately disliked it.
“What?”
“See, now I have to explain listening to you.”
“I'm asking.”
“I know.”

She was quiet.
Then:
“You remember everything I say.”
“Right.”
“You remember words.”
“Okay.”
“You remember what I said six months ago if it helps you in an argument.”
He smiled.
“That's called evidence.”
“Exactly.”
He stopped smiling.
Ana continued.
“Sometimes when I'm talking, I can see you getting ready.”
“Getting ready for what?”
“To talk.”
He almost objected.
Did not.
“You do this thing with your face.”
“Everybody keeps saying that.”
“Because you have a face.”
“Very insightful.”
“See.”
“Sorry.”

Ana said:

“Sometimes I know you heard every word I said and you still didn't hear me.”
He leaned against the wall beside the phone.
There it was.
Not elegant.
Not academic.
Worse.
Accurate.

He thought of Rachel.
His mother washing dishes.
His father answering questions with things that were not answers.
Manny saying I waited.
How many conversations had he preserved perfectly while missing the person inside them?
He started constructing a theory.
Caught himself.
Almost laughed.

“So what do I do?”
Ana sighed again.
“Why does everything have to become something you do?”
“What does that mean?”
“Maybe just listen.”
“That is not helpful.”
“I know.”
“Two ears, one mouth?”
Ana laughed.
“Who told you that?”
“Sal.”
“Who's Sal?”
“Guy at work.”
“He's a genius.”
“You don't know him.”

“Neither do you, apparently.”
He laughed.
“Fuck you.”

For the next several weeks the protagonist became a listener.
This was unbearable for everyone.
He waited conspicuously before answering.
He nodded.
He made eye contact.
He stopped interrupting so aggressively that people began wondering whether he was angry.
Peter was the first to object.
They were eating dinner.
Peter had been complaining about a professor.
The protagonist listened.
Nodded.
Peter continued.
The protagonist nodded again.
Finally Peter stopped.
“What the fuck are you doing?”
“Listening.”
“No, you're not.”
“Yes, I am.”
“You look like a therapist in a bad movie.”
The protagonist laughed.
“I’m trying not to interrupt.”
“Please interrupt. This is creepy.”

Silence was another skill he learned faster than listening.

He tried questions instead.
This created new problems.
His questions were too good.
Or rather, he thought they were.

People would say something and he would ask the question underneath the thing they said.
Sometimes this worked.
Sometimes a person wanted to complain about a roommate and did not wish to explore the psychological architecture of betrayal.
He was learning that depth, like hot sauce, was not universally improved by additional application.

Manny received the new technique badly.
They were walking toward a bodega when Manny mentioned trouble at work.
“What kind of trouble?”
“My boss is a dick.”
“Why?”
“Because he's a dick.”
“No, but what does he do?”
Manny looked over.
“What are you, writing a report?”
“I’m listening.”
“You're interrogating.”
“I’m asking questions.”
“I don't want questions.”
“What do you want?”
“I want you to say my boss is a dick.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Your boss is a dick.”
“Thank you.”
They entered the bodega.
Problem solved.

His mother was even less cooperative.
She called one evening and said she was tired.
“What happened?”
“Nothing happened. I'm tired.”

“From what?”
“Life.”
“No, I mean—”
“I know what you mean.”
He stopped.
She continued.
“Your father left something for you. When you come home, remind me.”
“Okay.”
“And call your brother.”
“Why?”
“Because he's your brother.”
“He can call me.”
Silence.
The protagonist smiled.
“I'll call him.”
“Good.”

Then his mother said:
“You sound different.”
“How?”
“I don't know.”
He waited.
She waited.
He nearly asked again.
Instead:
“All right.”
Another pause.
“You okay?”
“Yeah.”
“You sure?”
“Yeah.”
Then she told him about an aunt.
He listened.

At some point he realized his mother was telling him the same story she had told him the previous week.
His first instinct was to say so.
He didn't.
The story was slightly different this time.
A detail changed.
Then another.
He noticed.
Of course.
He did not correct her.
At the end she said:
“Anyway.”
He said:
“Yeah.”
That was all.
After they hung up he wondered which version was accurate.
Then wondered why accuracy had been his first question.

Baseball offered no relief.
A teammate named Marcus was struggling.
Not catastrophically.
Enough.
His swing had changed.
Everybody could see it.
Hands drifting.
Front side opening.
Late on velocity.
The protagonist watched him take batting practice.
He knew what was wrong.
Or believed he did.
After practice he approached.
“You're pulling off.”
Marcus kept packing his bag.
“I know.”
“Your front shoulder's flying.”

“I know.”
“And you're starting your hands—”
“I know.”
The protagonist stopped.
Marcus zipped the bag.
“You think I don't fucking know?”
“I’m trying to help.”
“I know.”
Same word.
Different temperature.

Marcus sat on the bench.
The protagonist remained standing.
After a while Marcus said:
“My father lost his job.”
The protagonist had not expected this.
“When?”
“Couple weeks ago.”
“Oh.”
Marcus looked toward the field.
“My mother keeps calling me telling me not to worry about it, which means I should definitely worry about it.”
The protagonist sat.
Marcus rubbed his hands together.
“I don't even know if I'm coming back next semester.”
The protagonist felt solutions arrive.
Financial aid.
Coach.
Work.
Loans.
Emergency funds.
He held them.
Marcus continued.
“And then I'm up there trying to hit and I'm thinking about this shit.”

The protagonist nodded.
Marcus laughed once.
“So yeah. My front shoulder's flying.”
There was nothing to add.

They sat.
Eventually the protagonist said:
“That fucking sucks.”
Marcus nodded.
“Yeah.”
The protagonist waited.
Marcus began talking.

Two days later Marcus went three for four.
The protagonist desperately wanted to believe listening had fixed him.
This is the kind of bullshit human beings do with coincidence.
Marcus had also spent two hours in the batting cage.
Evidence remained annoyingly plural.

The protagonist's own game deteriorated.
Not dramatically.
Enough.
He began thinking while hitting.
This is rarely recommended.
Pitcher.
Count.
Hands.
Weight.
Stride.
Timing.
Head.
See ball.
Stay back.

Don't think.
He thought about not thinking.
Then thought about how thinking about not thinking was still thinking.
Strike three.

Back in the dugout, the coach said:
“What'd you see?”
“Slider.”
“No.”
The protagonist looked up.
“Fastball.”
“No.”
“What?”
“You didn't see shit.”
The protagonist frowned.
“I saw the pitch.”
“You saw yourself.”
The coach walked away.
That pissed him off.
Partly because he had no immediate rebuttal.

Next at-bat he tried to simplify.
See ball.
Hit ball.
Two instructions.
Almost offensively primitive.
First pitch.
Fastball.
He fouled it back.
Second.
Ball.
Third.
He drove into right-center.
Double.

Standing on second, breathing hard, he wanted to construct an explanation for why simplicity had worked.
Then the shortstop said something to him.
The protagonist hadn't heard.
“What?”
The shortstop repeated:
“I said nice hit.”
“Oh.”
“Thanks.”

He laughed.
The shortstop looked confused.
No explanation.

Rachel and he remained friends.
A few weeks after the coffee shop, she found him after class.
“My mother left.”
He stopped.
“For real?”
“Yeah.”
“Where'd she go?”
“My aunt's.”
“How's your sister?”
“With her.”
“And your dad?”
Rachel looked at him.
The questions had escaped.
He saw it.
“Sorry.”
She smiled.
“No, it's okay.”
They walked.
He let her talk.
Her father had called.
Crying.

Promising.
Angry.
Apologetic.
Her mother wasn't sure whether she would stay away.
Her sister wanted to go home.
Rachel wanted everyone to stop calling her.
Then felt guilty for wanting that.
The protagonist listened.
At one point Rachel said:
“I don't know what I'm supposed to do.”
He knew many things she could do.
He said:
“Yeah.”
They kept walking.

After a while she asked:
“What do you think?”
He looked over.
This was different.
Permission.
“I think you can't be everybody's middleman.”
Rachel nodded.
“That's what I think too.”
He waited.
“And I think you can love your father without believing everything he says.”
She looked down.
He almost continued.
Stopped.
Rachel looked back.
“Anything else?”
“No.”
“Really?”
“I'm experimenting.”
She laughed.

“It's weird.”
“I know.”

The experiment did not make him kinder in any reliable way.
This should be understood.
He still interrupted people.
Still talked over Ana when angry.
Still listened for weakness during arguments.
Still remembered damaging details.
Still occasionally asked questions primarily because the answers might be interesting.
Once, at a party, a woman told him about a difficult relationship and he listened beautifully for twenty minutes largely because he wanted to sleep with her.
Human motives remained discouragingly mixed.
He did not sleep with her.
This was not necessarily virtue.
She wasn't interested.
Important distinction.

Another night he found himself explaining to three people that most people didn't actually listen.
This went on for several minutes.
Manny happened to be there.
He waited until the protagonist finished.
Then:
“Two ears.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
Everybody laughed.
“Fuck you.”
“One mouth.”
“I hate you.”
“You hear me?”
More laughter.
The protagonist laughed too.

There are humiliations friendship makes survivable by repeating them until they become property.

Months passed.
The saying remained stupid.
He remained unable to disprove it.

One evening he went to his grandmother's apartment on 109th Street again.
She was watching television.
He sat with her.
She asked about school.
“Good.”
Baseball.
“Good.”
His mother.
“Good.”
His father.
“Good.”
She nodded.
They watched television.
After a while she began telling him a story about the Dominican Republic.
He had heard parts before.
Or thought he had.
A house.
A neighbor.
Somebody's brother.
A trip.
Money hidden somewhere.
He could not follow every relation.
Normally he would interrupt.
“Wait, whose brother?”
Or:
“What year was this?”

Or:
“Was this before you came here?”
He didn't.
His grandmother continued.
Her hands moved when she spoke.
She laughed at one part before reaching the funny thing.
He laughed because she did.
Then the story became sad without announcing the transition.
Someone died.
Someone left.
Someone never returned.
His grandmother looked toward the television but wasn't watching it.
The protagonist sat beside her.
No questions.
After a while she said something softly in Spanish.
He heard the words.
He was not entirely sure what she meant.
For once he did not make her repeat them.

They sat together.
Television light moved across the room.
Outside, somewhere below, a horn sounded.
Then another.
Columbia remained a few blocks away with its books and buildings and beautiful women and invisible borders.
His grandmother continued watching television.
The protagonist looked at her.
She noticed.
“¿Qué?”
“Nothing.”
She turned back toward the screen.

He thought about asking her to tell the story again.

Not because he wanted the facts.
Because he wanted to hear her tell it.
The distinction was new enough that he did not trust it.
So he waited.
A commercial came on.
His grandmother complained about something in it.
He laughed.
Then she started another story.
He listened.
Not perfectly.
His mind wandered.
Returned.
He misunderstood something.
Let it remain misunderstood.
He thought of a question.
Held it.
Forgot it.
She kept talking.
For several minutes he did not prepare a response.
There was no revelation.
No sentence worth saving.
Nobody told him he had improved.
His grandmother did not know she was participating in anything.
She was simply talking.
And for once, that was enough.

Chapter 20

“The Ride Home”

The trouble began with a car.
Not his car.
This distinction mattered enormously until it didn't.
Marcus had borrowed it from his cousin for the weekend, an aging Buick with a passenger door that required lifting before closing and a radio that worked only when the headlights were off.
There were four of them going into the city.
Marcus drove.
The protagonist rode shotgun.
Peter and a kid named Luis were in the back.
Luis had grown up in Queens, attended the same college, and possessed the useful social talent of knowing somebody almost everywhere.
That night's somebody knew somebody having a party downtown.
The information was sufficient.
It was Friday.
They left after practice.
The protagonist had twenty-eight dollars.
This was enough money if nothing happened.
Something usually happened.

Marcus drove with both hands on the wheel.
Peter complained about the radio.
“You want music or headlights?” Marcus asked.

“Music.”
“Good. You can explain that to my cousin when we die.”
Luis leaned forward.
“Try the knob.”
“I tried the knob.”
“You gotta pull it out.”
“That's the lights.”
“No, the other knob.”
“There are two knobs.”
“Exactly.”
Marcus looked at him through the mirror.
“Sit the fuck back.”
The protagonist laughed.
Manhattan appeared ahead of them.
That still did something.
He would eventually become sophisticated enough to pretend otherwise.
He was not there yet.

The party was in an apartment belonging to someone none of them knew.
This was normal.
Someone named Michael or Mitchell opened the door.
Luis hugged him.
This established legitimacy.
The others entered.
The apartment had bookshelves high enough to require a ladder and furniture that looked inherited rather than purchased.
The protagonist noticed this immediately.
Old money, new money, no money—he was becoming increasingly interested in the accents wealth used when it didn't want to introduce itself.
There were perhaps thirty people inside.
Students.

Young professionals.
A few older people.
Music low enough for conversation.
Wine.
Actual wine glasses.
Someone had put cheese on a wooden board.
Peter whispered:
“We're fucked.”
“Why?”
“I don't know how to eat any of this.”
The protagonist picked up a piece of cheese.
“Like that.”
“You know what kind that is?”
“No.”
Peter took one.
“Then shut up.”

Luis disappeared almost immediately.
Marcus found somebody talking baseball.
Peter found alcohol.
The protagonist found a woman.
Or perhaps she found him.
Her name was Katherine.
Twenty-two.
Columbia.
There it was again.
He nearly laughed.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You smiled.”
“I do that sometimes.”
“Not like that.”
He liked her immediately.
Not loved.
Not understood.

Liked.
She had dark hair pulled back and wore almost no makeup.
She asked questions and then appeared to listen to the answers, which he now recognized as an aggressive social technique.
“What school?”
He told her.
“What are you studying?”
He told her.
“Baseball?”
“Yeah.”
“You any good?”
He smiled.
“That depends who you ask.”
“I’m asking you.”
Dangerous.
“I’m good.”
No self-deprecation.
No escape hatch.
Katherine nodded.
“Good.”
He liked her more.

They talked about books.
This helped.
Then politics.
This helped less.
She disagreed with him.
Not theatrically.
She simply kept saying things he could not dismiss.
He enjoyed this.
She mentioned an author he had only partly read.
He almost pretended otherwise.
Almost.
“I've read some.”

“Did you like him?”
“The parts I read.”
“What parts?”
He told her.
She nodded.
No exposure.
No humiliation.
Truth continued its irritating streak of survivability.

Then she asked:
“You from the city?”
“Yes.”
“Where?”
There was a pause.
Small.
Maybe nobody else would have noticed.
He did.
The available biographies gathered.
California had retired temporarily.
Architecture remained possible but irrelevant.
Bronx was true.
Brooklyn could be made true depending on family geography and generosity.
Manhattan had recently acquired his grandmother.
He said:
“The Bronx.”
Katherine smiled.
“What part?”
He told her.
“You grew up there?”
“Yeah.”
“My roommate's from the Bronx.”
“Where?”
She named somewhere completely different.
He laughed.

“That's not near me.”
“I know. I didn't mean—”
“I'm fucking with you.”
She laughed.
The protagonist felt strangely relieved.
He had told the truth and the woman remained beautiful.
Progress was becoming suspiciously uneventful.

Then Katherine said:
“My roommate says Columbia people are terrified of going above certain streets.”
“Your roommate's right.”
“You think?”
“Some of them.”
“You?”
He smiled.
“My grandmother lives on 109th.”
“Really?”
“Dominican.”
“So you're a townie.”
The protagonist stared.
Katherine laughed.
“What?”
“Who taught you that word?”
“What word?”
“Townie.”
“Everybody knows that word.”
“No, everybody does not know that fucking word.”
She was laughing harder now.
“Why are you offended?”
“I'm not offended.”
“You look offended.”
“I have a complicated history with the term.”
“Of course you do.”
“What does that mean?”

“You have a complicated history with everything.”
They had known each other forty minutes.
This seemed presumptuous.
Also accurate.

Across the room Marcus caught his eye.
The protagonist looked away.
Not because he was ashamed.
Because Marcus had a face that could convert eye contact into commentary from thirty feet away.

Katherine asked:
“You have a girlfriend?”
There are questions that alter the oxygen in a room.
He heard Ana's voice immediately.
Not words.
Voice.
Then Sal.
Feelings are not instructions.
Then Rachel.
Listening.
Then his father.
Don't make somebody pay for shit they didn't do.
His internal advisory board had become overcrowded.
“Yes.”
Katherine nodded.
That was it.
The protagonist felt disappointed.
This annoyed him.
He had done the correct thing and received no prize.

“Serious?”
He looked at her.
“Yeah.”
“How long?”

He told her.
Katherine took a sip.
“She's in the city?”
“Yeah.”
“Then what are you doing talking to me?”
He smiled.
“Talking.”
“That's all?”
He could have lied.
Instead:
“I don't know.”
Katherine looked at him for a second.
“That's probably the right answer.”

They kept talking.
This was where the moral clarity should have arrived.
It did not.
Knowing he had a girlfriend did not make Katherine less attractive.
Admitting he had a girlfriend did not make him less interested.
Understanding his interest did not remove it.
Self-awareness had apparently been oversold.

Around midnight Peter was drunk.
Not dangerously.
Annoyingly.
He had decided the inherited furniture was evidence of aristocratic decline.
“This chair,” he announced, “has oppressed people.”
Marcus looked at the chair.
“Sit somewhere else.”
Peter sat in it.
“I'm reclaiming it.”
Luis had disappeared with a woman.

Nobody knew where.
Marcus wanted to leave by one.
The protagonist did not.
Katherine was still there.
This created competing interests.

At twelve forty-five Marcus approached.
“We're leaving.”
“Already?”
“Already?”
Marcus looked at his watch.
“It's almost one.”
“So?”
“So I gotta get this car back.”
“To who?”
“My cousin.”
“I know that. When?”
“Morning.”
“So we got time.”
Marcus stared at him.
“We're leaving.”
The protagonist glanced toward Katherine.
Marcus followed the glance.
Then looked back.
“Oh.”
“Don't.”
“Oh.”
“Shut up.”
Marcus smiled.
“You got a girlfriend.”
“I know.”
“Apparently not enough.”
“Nothing's happening.”
“Then let's go.”
The protagonist disliked the efficiency of this argument.

“Give me like half an hour.”
Marcus shook his head.
“Why?”
“Because I'm having a good time.”
“So am I. In my cousin's car.”
“Half an hour.”
Marcus looked toward Peter, who was explaining colonialism to a lamp.
“Twenty minutes.”
“Thirty.”
“Twenty.”
“Fine.”
Marcus walked away.

The protagonist returned to Katherine.
“You're leaving?”
“In twenty minutes.”
“That's specific.”
“My ride.”
“You could stay.”
There it was.
He heard her.
More importantly, he listened.
Stay.
Not philosophy.
Not ambiguity.
Not context.
Stay.
He wanted to.

“How would I get back?”
“Train.”
He knew this.
There were trains.

He had money.
Not much.
Enough, probably.
He could stay.
Marcus could leave.
Peter could go with Marcus.
Luis was somewhere.
The world had presented an ordinary choice.
He immediately began making it complicated.

Katherine said:
“You don't have to.”
“I know.”
“Do you want to?”
“Yes.”
The word came out before the committee convened.
She smiled.
“Then stay.”

He found Marcus near the door.
“I'm gonna stay.”
Marcus looked at him.
“Okay.”
The protagonist had expected resistance.
“You good?”
“Yeah.”
“Peter?”
“Coming with me.”
“Luis?”
“Found him.”
“Okay.”
Marcus put on his jacket.
Then:
“You got money?”
“Yeah.”

“How much?”
“Enough.”
“How much?”
“Twenty-something.”
Marcus stared.
“You know how you're getting back?”
“Train.”
“At what time?”
“I'll figure it out.”
Marcus nodded slowly.
There was something in the nod.
The protagonist recognized it.
Judgment.
“You got something to say?”
“No.”
“Say it.”
Marcus shrugged.
“You always figure shit out after you decide what you want.”
The protagonist felt the hit.
“What's that supposed to mean?”
Marcus opened the door.
“Nothing.”
“Don't do that.”
“Do what?”
“Say something and then act like you didn't say something.”
Marcus laughed.
“Now you're listening?”
The protagonist didn't.
Not really.
He heard the accusation.
Listening would have required allowing it to interfere.

Marcus left.
The protagonist returned to Katherine.
For approximately six minutes, staying felt like freedom.

Then Katherine's friend wanted to go somewhere else.
A bar.
Someone knew the bartender.
Katherine asked if he wanted to come.
Of course.
They left.

Outside, the cold had sharpened.
They walked several blocks.
Katherine slipped her arm through his.
The protagonist felt the entire moral universe become less theoretical.
He did not remove her arm.
He also did not put his arm around her.
This distinction became important to him.
Nobody else had requested it.

At the bar someone checked IDs.
His was rejected.
Katherine's wasn't.
She looked at him.
“Shit.”
He shrugged as though this occurred to him constantly in international capitals.
“I'll meet you later.”
“Where?”
Good question.
She lived near Columbia.
Of course she did.
She wrote an address on a piece of paper.
“Come by.”
He took it.
Her hand remained on his for a second.
Then she went inside.
The protagonist stood on the sidewalk.

Alone.

This was the moment in which the universe demonstrated its complete indifference to narrative momentum.
He had stayed behind for a woman.
The woman was now inside a bar.
He was outside.
Marcus was gone.
Peter was gone.
Luis was gone.
The protagonist had twenty-three dollars and an address near Columbia.
He laughed.
“Outstanding.”

He walked.
Found a subway entrance.
Closed.
Not permanently.
Something with service.
A sign.
He read it twice.
Another entrance several blocks away.
He walked there.
Waited.
A train came.
Wrong direction.
He realized this after boarding.
Got off.
Crossed platforms.
Waited again.
The night became less cinematic by the minute.

At some point he found a pay phone.
Called Katherine's number from the paper.

No answer.
Again.
No answer.
He considered calling Ana.
The thought was so absurd he laughed aloud.
A man passing the phone looked at him.
The protagonist stopped laughing.

He called home.
No.
Hung up before dialing.
Called Manny.
No answer.
Called Marcus.
The dorm phone rang.
And rang.
Someone finally answered.
“Hello?”
“Marcus there?”
“Who?”
“Marcus.”
“Hold on.”
Several minutes.
Then Marcus.
“Hello?”
“Yo.”
Silence.
“Yo.”
“Where are you?”
The protagonist told him.
Marcus laughed.
Not kindly.
“Fuck you.”
“You called me.”
“I need a favor.”

“Of course you do.”

The protagonist asked whether Marcus could come back.
Silence.
“Come back?”
“Yeah.”
“With the car?”
“Yeah.”
“My cousin's car.”
“I know.”
“You told me you were taking the train.”
“I know.”
“So take the train.”
“Service is fucked up.”
“Then wait.”
“It's freezing.”
Marcus laughed again.
“You got a coat?”
“Yes.”
“Congratulations.”

The protagonist became angry.
This was useful because anger made dependency temporarily less visible.
“Yo, forget it.”
“Okay.”
“I said forget it.”
“I heard you.”
The protagonist nearly slammed the receiver down.
Then stopped.
Two ears.
One mouth.
Fuck Sal.

Marcus said:

“You want me to come get you?”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“Yes.”
“Say it normal.”
“What?”
“Ask me normal.”
He hated him.
“Can you come pick me up?”
Marcus waited.
Then:
“Yeah.”
Relief.
Immediate.
Embarrassing.
“Thanks.”
“I gotta wake Peter.”
“Why?”
“Because I don't know this fucking city like you do.”
The protagonist smiled despite himself.
“I'll tell you where.”
“No. You stay exactly where you are.”
“Okay.”
“And don't become an architect while I'm driving.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Fuck you.”

He waited forty-five minutes.
Maybe fifty.
Years later he remembered an hour.
Marcus insisted it was thirty-five.
Peter claimed it was long enough for him to sober up, which was demonstrably false.
The exact duration has not survived.
The cold has.

The Buick finally appeared.
The protagonist opened the passenger door.
It would not close.
Marcus leaned across.
“Lift it.”
“I know.”
“You clearly don't.”
He lifted.
Closed.
Peter was asleep in the back.
Or unconscious in the socially acceptable collegiate sense.
The car smelled like stale beer and something fried.
Marcus pulled away.
No conversation.

After several blocks:
“Where's the girl?”
“Bar.”
Marcus nodded.
Another block.
“You stayed for a girl who went into a bar without you.”
“Apparently.”
“Good night?”
“Excellent.”
Marcus laughed.
The protagonist did too.
For a moment everything was fine.
Then Marcus said:
“You're an asshole.”
The protagonist looked over.
“What?”
“You heard me.”
“For making you come back?”
“For everything being everybody else's problem once your plan goes bad.”

The protagonist's face hardened.
“You said you'd come.”
“Yeah.”
“So?”
“So I came.”
“Then why are you bitching?”
Marcus looked at the road.
There it was.
A door opening.
The protagonist could have walked through it.
Instead he defended himself.
“You could've said no.”
Marcus nodded.
“True.”
“I didn't force you.”
“True.”
“You make your own decisions.”
“True.”
The protagonist felt himself winning.
This should have been a warning.

Marcus stopped at a red light.
“You know why I came?”
“Because we're friends.”
“Yeah.”
The protagonist waited.
Marcus looked at him.
“That's why you're an asshole.”
The light changed.
They drove.

The protagonist understood the sentence.
Every word.
He could have diagrammed it.

Friendship created obligations that could be exploited precisely because the other person was free to refuse them.
He understood.
Perfectly.
Then:
“You're acting like I planned this.”
Marcus laughed once.
“I didn't say you planned it.”
“Then what?”
“You don't gotta plan being selfish.”
The protagonist looked out the window.
That one stayed.

Peter woke up.
“Are we oppressed?”
Neither answered.
He went back to sleep.

Marcus drove north.
The protagonist watched storefronts pass.
He thought about Katherine.
Ana.
The address in his pocket.
Marcus.
The car.
His cousin.
The twenty-three dollars.
He could arrange the evening into several different stories.
In one, he had done nothing wrong.
He had been honest with Katherine about Ana.
He had not kissed her.
He had not cheated.
He had planned to take the train.
Transit failed.
He called a friend.

The friend agreed.
Perfectly defensible.
In another version, he had wanted something, ignored foreseeable inconvenience, and relied upon friendship to absorb the cost when his desire became impractical.
Also defensible.
Less flattering.
He preferred the first.
This did not make it false.
That was becoming the problem.

Marcus stopped outside the dorm.
Peter woke.
“Where are we?”
“France,” Marcus said.
Peter nodded.
“Beautiful.”
He got out.
The protagonist stayed.
Marcus looked over.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Then get out.”
The protagonist opened the door.
Stopped.
“I'm sorry.”
Marcus rubbed his eyes.
“For what?”
The protagonist almost gave the complete answer.
For staying.
For calling.
For making his problem Marcus's.
For arguing after Marcus came.
For needing to win the argument about whether he had the right to ask for help.

Instead:
“Making you drive back.”
Marcus nodded.
“Okay.”
Not forgiveness.
Not punishment.
Okay.
The protagonist got out.

He called Ana the next morning.
Not from guilt.
Not entirely.
He wanted to hear her voice.
She answered.
They talked.
He told her about the party.
Some of it.
Marcus.
Peter.
The car.
The subway.
He did not mention Katherine immediately.
This was omission.
He knew it while doing it.
Listening had made dishonesty more technically sophisticated.

Ana laughed at Peter believing they were in France.
Then:
“Anybody interesting there?”
The protagonist looked at the wall.
There are moments when lying requires effort.
This one required almost none.
“Yeah. Some people.”
“Girls?”

He smiled.
“Yes, Ana. There were women at the party.”
“I'm asking.”
“I know.”
Silence.
He could hear the change in her breathing.
He knew her well enough.
This was the terrible advantage of listening.

“There was a girl I talked to.”
“Okay.”
“Her name was Katherine.”
“Okay.”
“She goes to Columbia.”
“Okay.”
He continued.
“I told her about you.”
Ana said nothing.
He wanted credit.
This embarrassed him.
He wanted Ana to know that when another beautiful woman asked whether he had a girlfriend, he had said yes.
As though fidelity deserved a parade for correctly answering a question.

“Did anything happen?”
“No.”
True.
Mostly.
“She asked me to stay.”
Ana was quiet.
“And?”
“I stayed.”
Longer silence.
“But nothing happened.”

“I heard you.”
The phrase had changed owners.

Ana asked:
“Why did you stay?”
He could have said:
Because I wanted to see what would happen.
That was probably closest.
Instead:
“Everybody was having a good time.”
“Everybody?”
He closed his eyes.
“No.”
“Then why did you stay?”
He knew the answer.
This time listening was not the problem.
Talking was.

“Because I wanted to.”
Ana breathed out.
“Okay.”
He hated okay.

“You mad?”
“I don't know.”
“Nothing happened.”
“I know.”
“I told her I had a girlfriend.”
“I know.”
“She knew.”
“I know.”
The protagonist stopped.
Ana said:
“You keep telling me facts like I'm a jury.”
That landed.

He sat on the edge of his bed.
“What do you want me to say?”
“I don't know.”
“Do you want me to apologize?”
“I don't know.”
“Then what are we doing?”
The sentence came out harder than he intended.
Ana went quiet.
He knew immediately.
Could hear it.
Could almost see her face through the telephone.
He had become good enough at listening to recognize damage in real time.
This did not prevent him from causing it.

Ana said:
“I have to go.”
“Ana.”
“I have to go.”
“Can we talk later?”
“Probably.”
“Probably?”
“I said I have to go.”
The line disconnected.

He held the receiver.
For a while.
Then replaced it.
He did not call back.
This was partly restraint.
Partly pride.
Motives continued refusing segregation.

That afternoon he found Marcus.

Marcus was cleaning mud from his cleats.
The protagonist sat nearby.
Marcus did not look up.
“You tell your girl?”
“Yeah.”
“How'd that go?”
“Great.”
Marcus smiled.
“France?”
“Basically.”
They sat.

After a while the protagonist said:
“You were right.”
Marcus stopped cleaning.
This was apparently rare enough to interrupt manual labor.
“About what?”
“Last night.”
Marcus looked at him.
The protagonist expected satisfaction.
None came.
“Okay.”
Again.
That fucking word.

“I was being selfish.”
Marcus returned to the cleat.
“Probably.”
“That's it?”
“What you want?”
“I don't know.”
“You want me to tell you you're a good person because you figured out you were an asshole?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Maybe.”

Marcus smiled.
“At least you're honest.”
“No, I'm not.”
Marcus looked up.
The protagonist was smiling too.
That was all.

Several days later Katherine called.
He had forgotten giving her the dorm number.
Or remembered selectively.
“Where'd you go?”
“You went into the bar.”
“I came back out.”
“When?”
“Like twenty minutes later.”
The protagonist stared at the phone.
“I was gone.”
“I noticed.”
She laughed.
“I called the number you gave me.”
“Sorry.”
“You could've waited.”
“I could've.”
Pause.
“You want to come down this weekend?”
There it was again.
Ordinary choice.
No philosophical disguise required.

He thought of Ana.
Marcus.
The Buick.
109th Street.
Columbia.
Katherine's arm through his.

He wanted to go.
This was true.
He also wanted to be the kind of man who did not want to go.
This was not true.
Or not yet.

“I can't.”
“Can't or won't?”
He smiled.
“Won't.”
Katherine was quiet.
“Girlfriend?”
“Yeah.”
“Okay.”
He waited for relief.
It came.
So did disappointment.
The human nervous system remained ideologically incoherent.

“Maybe I'll see you around,” Katherine said.
“Maybe.”
They hung up.
He sat beside the phone.
No triumph.
No moral cleanliness.
He had made one decision.
That was all.

That weekend he went home.
Manny found him on the stoop.
“You look miserable.”
“I'm fine.”
“Girl?”
“Why does everybody always know?”

“You're nineteen.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Sal says the same shit.”
“Who's Sal?”
“Long story.”
“Then don't tell me.”
They sat.

After a while Manny said:
“You going out tonight?”
“Maybe.”
“People's?”
“Maybe.”
“Some girls coming.”
The protagonist looked over.
“Pretty?”
“Ugly as fuck. That's why I mentioned them.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Asshole.”
“You coming?”
He thought about Ana.
Then about not thinking about Ana.
“Yeah.”
Manny stood.
“Good.”

That night he got dressed carefully.
Too carefully.
Changed shirts twice.
Cologne.
Shoes.
Mirror.
The war against materialism suffered another tactical defeat.
His mother passed the bathroom.
“Where you going?”

“Out.”
“With who?”
“Manny.”
“What time you coming home?”
“I don't know.”
She looked at him.
He smiled.
“I'll be careful.”
“I didn't ask that.”
“I know.”

He met Manny downstairs.
They walked toward the train.
The city was already moving without them.
Cars.
Music.
People heading somewhere.
Manny talked about work.
The protagonist listened.
Mostly.
Then Manny said:
“You hear anything I just said?”
The protagonist looked over.
“Yes.”
“What'd I say?”
He repeated nearly all of it.
Manny shook his head.
“Freak.”
They kept walking.

The protagonist had heard him.
Whether he had listened was harder to determine.
The distinction no longer fit neatly into a proverb.
Perhaps it never had.
He knew Ana was hurt.

He knew why.
He knew Marcus had been right.
He knew why.
He knew he wanted Katherine.
He knew why—or had several excellent candidates.
He knew himself better than he had a year earlier.
This had not made him easier to live with.

At the subway entrance Manny stopped.
“You coming?”
The protagonist had fallen several steps behind.
“Yeah.”
Manny descended.
The protagonist followed.
Underground, a train could already be heard approaching.
They ran.
Manny made it through the doors.
The protagonist did not.
The doors closed between them.
Manny laughed through the glass.
The protagonist gave him the finger.
The train pulled away.
He stood alone on the platform.
Another would come.
He knew that.
For once there was nothing to do but wait.

Chapter 21

“The Check”

The check bounced on a Tuesday.
Not metaphorically.
The bank sent the envelope.
His mother called.
His father did not.
This distinction made the whole thing worse.
He was between classes when somebody from the dorm yelled his name down the hallway and pointed toward the phone.
“Home.”
The protagonist picked up.
“Hello?”
His mother said:
“Everything okay?”
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
A pause.
Then:
“You wrote your father a check?”
He immediately knew.
Twenty-five dollars.
Maybe thirty.
He had mailed it after borrowing money for the train weeks earlier.
Not because his father had asked.

Because he had decided repayment would prove something.
“Yes.”
“It came back.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“What do you mean?”
“What do you think I mean?”
“I had money in there.”
“No, you didn't.”
“I should've.”
“That’s a different sentence.”
His mother had recently become dangerous.
“How much was the fee?”
“Forget the fee.”
“How much?”
“Your father doesn't want you worrying.”
“I’m asking you.”
“And I’m telling you he doesn't want you worrying.”
The protagonist looked at the wall.
The hallway continued around him.
Somebody passed carrying a towel.
Somebody laughed in another room.
He lowered his voice.
“Put him on.”
“He's not here.”
This was probably true.
He distrusted it anyway.
“Did he see it?”
“Of course he saw it.”
“Was he mad?”
His mother sighed.
“No.”
That was worse.

The bank was forty minutes away by bus.
He went after class.

The woman behind the desk explained insufficient funds with the exhausted patience of someone who spent her days introducing arithmetic to optimists.
“You had twenty-one dollars and fourteen cents.”
He stared.
“No.”
She turned the paper toward him.
There it was.
$21.14.
He had written a check for twenty-five.
The returned-item fee had then pulled the account lower.
He looked at the dates.
A meal.
A bookstore charge.
An ATM withdrawal he barely remembered.
The numbers were not wrong.
This irritated him.
“Can you reverse the fee?”
The woman looked at him.
“Why?”
“I thought I had enough.”
She waited.
He heard himself.
“So did everybody else whose check bounced.”
She almost smiled.
Almost.
He changed strategies.
“It's my first time.”
She checked.
That was true.
“I can waive part of it.”
“Part?”
“Yes.”
“How much?”
She told him.

He did the math.
It still hurt.
He wanted to argue.
Instead:
“Okay.”
The woman typed.
Then slid a form toward him.
“Sign here.”
He signed.
She handed him the receipt.
Transaction complete.
No lesson announced.
No music.
No applause for accepting consequences.
He left poorer.

Sal noticed his mood within ten minutes.
“What now?”
“Nothing.”
“Girl?”
“No.”
“Money?”
The protagonist looked at him.
Sal smiled.
“Money.”
The protagonist began stacking cartons.
Sal waited.
Finally:
“I bounced a check.”
“How much?”
“Twenty-five dollars.”
Sal stopped.
“You bounced twenty-five dollars?”
“Apparently.”
Sal laughed so hard he had to put the clipboard down.

“Fuck you.”
“Twenty-five?”
“I said fuck you.”
Sal was still laughing.
“You're in college and can't count to twenty-five.”
“I had other charges.”
“Of course you did.”
The protagonist kept working.
Sal wiped his eyes.
“Who'd you write it to?”
The protagonist said nothing.
Sal stopped laughing.
“Oh.”
The protagonist hated the change.
“My father.”
Sal nodded.
“That's rough.”
“I’m paying him back.”
“That's what got you here.”
“He lent me money.”
“So?”
“So I owe him.”
Sal leaned against the table.
“Did he ask?”
“No.”
“Then why'd you send it?”
“Because I owed him.”
Sal looked at him.
“No. Why'd you send it?”
The protagonist almost said the same thing again.
Then didn't.
Sal had a talent for standing next to obvious answers until they became suspicious.

“I didn't want him thinking I needed help.”

Sal laughed once.
“After asking him for help.”
“Right.”
“Excellent system.”
The protagonist smiled despite himself.
Sal picked up the clipboard.
“My daughter called me last night.”
“Nursing school?”
“Yeah.”
“She need money?”
“She always needs money.”
“You giving it to her?”
“Yeah.”
“Does she pay you back?”
Sal looked at him as though the question were mildly obscene.
“She’s my daughter.”
“So?”
“So what do you mean so?”
“I mean doesn't she owe you?”
Sal shrugged.
“Probably. I owe her too.”
“For what?”
Sal looked down at the clipboard.
“Everything ain't a bill, College.”
Then he walked away.

The protagonist disliked this answer because it contained too much room.
He preferred debts that came with numbers.
Numbers behaved.
Twenty dollars.
Twenty-five.
Thirty-two with fees.
You knew when you had paid.

Family was less professional.

He called home that night.
His father answered.
“Hello?”
“Yo.”
“What’s up?”
“I heard about the check.”
His father said nothing.
“I’m sorry.”
“For what?”
“For bouncing it.”
“Okay.”
“I’m gonna send another one.”
“No.”
“I have money coming Friday.”
“No.”
“I owe you.”
“You don't owe me twenty dollars.”
“It wasn't twenty.”
“Whatever.”
“I borrowed it.”
His father sighed.
“Why are we talking about this?”
“Because I borrowed money from you.”
“You needed train fare.”
“Right.”
“So I gave you train fare.”
“Right.”
“That’s it.”
The protagonist could feel frustration rise.
“That's not how money works.”
His father laughed.
“Apparently not for you.”
The protagonist smiled despite himself.

“I'm serious.”
“So am I.”
His father lowered his voice slightly.
“You're my son.”
The protagonist waited.
Nothing else came.
He wanted something cleaner.
A rule.
A boundary.
At what age did train fare become debt?
At what amount?
When did helping become enabling?
When did accepting help become dependence?
His father had apparently decided these questions were not worth forming.
This was irresponsible.
Also enviable.

“I still want to pay you back.”
His father said:
“Then take your mother to dinner one day.”
“What?”
“When you got money.”
“That doesn't pay you back.”
“It pays me back.”
The protagonist laughed.
“You're making up accounting.”
“Everybody makes up accounting.”
That stayed with him.
Not because it was profound.
Because his father had said it while probably looking for something on television.

The next month Sal asked him to cover a Saturday.
The protagonist had plans.

Not important plans.
Still plans.
A party.
Maybe Ana.
Maybe Manny if he went home.
He said no.
Sal nodded.
No pressure.
Then Friday afternoon Sal's daughter came into the shop.
The nursing-school one.
Maria.
He had met her once before.
She looked tired and carried a backpack that seemed designed by someone hostile to spinal alignment.
“Dad?”
“In back.”
The protagonist pointed.
She disappeared behind the door.
A few minutes later he heard voices.
Not shouting.
Worse.
Low.
He was not trying to listen.
This did not prevent hearing.
“I can work Sundays.”
“You need to study.”
“I can do both.”
“No.”
“I don't want Ma picking up more.”
“She wants to.”
“No, she doesn't.”
Silence.
Then Sal:
“We’ll figure it out.”
Maria laughed.

Not happily.
“You always say that.”
“What you want me to say?”
“I don't know.”
The protagonist looked down at the invoice in front of him.
The world was repeating itself without concern for originality.

Maria came out first.
Her face had changed.
Not crying.
Close.
She saw the protagonist.
“Hey.”
“Hey.”
She adjusted the backpack.
“College treating you good?”
“Mostly.”
She smiled.
“Lucky.”
Then left.
Sal came out later.
Nothing on his face.
“Where were we?”
The protagonist told him.
They went back to work.

An hour passed.
Then the protagonist said:
“You still need Saturday?”
Sal looked up.
“I thought you had plans.”
“I do.”
“Then go.”
“I can work.”

“You sure?”
“No.”
Sal laughed.
“Good enough.”

Saturday was dead.
This offended him.
He had sacrificed social possibility to stand in a quiet room counting inventory.
Nobody appeared to appreciate the symbolism.
Sal wasn't even there most of the day.
Another employee opened.
The protagonist spent six hours moving boxes, checking numbers, sweeping, and reconsidering every decision that had led to this one.
At two in the afternoon Ana called the shop.
She had gotten the number from somewhere.
“Where are you?”
“Work.”
“I thought you were coming home.”
“I was.”
“You didn't call.”
There it was.
“I picked up a shift.”
“You could've called.”
“I know.”
“Why didn't you?”
He nearly said I forgot.
Not true.
He had thought about calling.
Then gotten busy.
Then thought calling late would create a conversation.
Then postponed.
The truth was less flattering than forgetfulness.
“I kept putting it off.”

Ana was quiet.
“Okay.”
The word again.
He had come to hate okay because it frequently meant the conversation had lost hope of prosecution.
“I’m sorry.”
“I know.”
“Are you mad?”
“A little.”
“I picked up work.”
“I heard you.”
He closed his eyes.
Of course.

“I was trying to help Sal.”
“Who's Sal?”
He had told her.
Several times.
“The guy I work for.”
“Oh. Right.”
He felt annoyed.
She had not remembered.
This was absurd.
His entire complaint against other people was that they did not listen properly.
Now he wanted her to remember Sal as proof that he mattered enough to justify disappointing her.
“His daughter's in nursing school.”
Ana waited.
“They're tight on money.”
“Okay.”
“So I covered the shift.”
“That’s nice.”
The sentence should have satisfied him.
It didn't.

“You don't sound like you think it's nice.”
“What do you want me to say?”
He heard himself from a dozen conversations.
He looked at the phone.
“Nothing.”
“Okay.”
There it was again.
They hung up badly.
Not horribly.
Badly.

At four, Sal arrived.
“You're still here.”
“That's usually how work works.”
Sal nodded.
“How was it?”
“Dead.”
“Good.”
“Good?”
“Means nobody stole anything.”
The protagonist laughed.
Sal went through the register.
Then:
“Thanks for covering.”
There.
Recognition.
The protagonist immediately felt better.
This disgusted him.

Sal counted cash.
The protagonist watched.
After a minute:
“Maria okay?”
Sal stopped.
Then continued counting.

“Yeah.”
The protagonist waited.
Sal looked up.
“You heard us.”
“A little.”
Sal nodded.
No anger.
“She wants to help.”
“So let her.”
Sal returned to the money.
“Easy for you.”
The protagonist felt the hit.
“What does that mean?”
“It means easy for you.”
“Why?”
Sal looked up again.
“My daughter taking shifts means she's not studying. Her not studying means nursing school gets harder. Nursing school gets harder means maybe she quits. She quits so she can help me pay for nursing school.”
The protagonist said nothing.
Sal put the bills into the drawer.
“Good system.”
He recognized the tone.

“Then borrow money.”
Sal laughed.
“From who?”
“I don't know.”
“Exactly.”
“Loans?”
“Already.”
“Financial aid?”
“Already.”
“Family?”

“Already.”
Each answer closed a door.
The protagonist felt strangely embarrassed.
Not because he had asked.
Because he had believed the problem had been waiting for his vocabulary.

Sal locked the register.
“My wife wants more hours. Maria wants more hours. I can work Sundays. Everybody wants to save everybody.”
He put on his coat.
“Beautiful family.”
The protagonist couldn't tell whether he meant it sarcastically.
Probably both.

They walked outside.
Cold.
Sal lit a cigarette.
The protagonist said:
“My father told me to take my mother to dinner.”
Sal looked over.
“What?”
“I bounced a check trying to pay him back. He said don't pay him. Take my mother to dinner when I have money.”
Sal smiled.
“Smart man.”
“He's making up accounting.”
“That's family.”
The protagonist put his hands in his pockets.
They stood there.

Sal said:
“You going home?”
“Yeah.”

“Train?”
“Yeah.”
Sal reached into his wallet.
The protagonist stepped back immediately.
“No.”
Sal looked at him.
“What?”
“I got money.”
“I was gonna give you your pay.”
“Oh.”
Sal stared.
The protagonist laughed.
“Fuck.”
“College.”

The paycheck was larger than he expected.
Saturday hours.
He looked at it.
Then at Sal.
“This includes today?”
“That's generally why people work.”
The protagonist folded it carefully.
Sal flicked ash.
“You gonna send it to your father?”
“Fuck you.”
Sal smiled.
“Good.”

He took his mother to dinner three weeks later.
Nothing expensive.
A neighborhood place she liked.
He had intended to make it a surprise.
She ruined this by asking six questions before leaving the apartment.
“Where we going?”

“You'll see.”
“Why?”
“Because.”
“Who else is coming?”
“Nobody.”
“What's wrong?”
“Nothing.”
“Did something happen?”
“No.”
“Then why are you taking me out?”
The protagonist stopped putting on his coat.
“Can I just take you to dinner?”
His mother looked suspicious.
“Why?”
He laughed.
“You know what? Forget it.”
“No, no. Let's go.”
She was already getting her purse.

At the restaurant she ordered cautiously.
He noticed.
“You can get whatever you want.”
“I know.”
“You're looking at prices.”
“So are you.”
“I’m paying.”
“With what?”
“Money.”
She smiled.
“Whose?”
“Mine.”
This was technically true.
The check from Sal had entered his account and survived.

She ordered something she liked.

He ordered too much because paying for dinner seemed to require abundance.
His mother told him he was wasting money.
He told her that was the point.
She said that made no sense.
He said exactly.
They ate.

Halfway through the meal his mother asked:
“How's Ana?”
“Good.”
“Good good or you don't want to talk about it?”
He smiled.
“Complicated.”
She rolled her eyes.
“Everything with you is complicated.”
“Things are complicated.”
“No. Things are things.”
He laughed.
She continued eating.

He told her some of it.
Not Katherine.
Not directly.
Arguments.
Distance.
College.
How different everything felt.
His mother listened.
Mostly.
Then interrupted.
“You talk too much.”
The protagonist laughed.
“That's hereditary.”
“From your father.”

“Absolutely not.”
“Don't argue.”
He raised both hands.
She smiled.

Later she said:
“You know, your father worries about you.”
“He doesn't say anything.”
“That's how he worries.”
“That's stupid.”
“Probably.”
“You should tell him that.”
“I married him. That was enough information.”
The protagonist nearly choked.
His mother kept eating.

The check came.
He reached for it.
His mother reached too.
“No.”
“I have money.”
“I’m paying.”
“You don't have to.”
“I know.”
She let go.
That mattered.
He took out cash.
Counted carefully.
Then counted again.
His mother watched.
“You got enough?”
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
He looked at her.
“Yes.”

This time he actually was.

Outside, the air was cold.
His mother pulled her coat tighter.
“You didn't have to do this.”
“I know.”
She looked at him.
“Thank you.”
No joke.
No qualification.
He felt something tighten in his throat.
Disproportionate.
Embarrassing.
He nodded.

They walked home.
Not far.
His mother pointed out a store that had changed owners.
Then another.
She complained about prices.
They passed people carrying groceries.
A man arguing with a cabdriver.
Two kids running ahead of a woman who kept yelling for them to slow down.
Nothing happened.

Near the building his mother stopped.
“You paid your father back.”
The protagonist looked at her.
“What?”
“This.”
He laughed.
“That makes no sense.”
“I know.”
She started walking again.

He stayed still a second.
Then followed.

His father was on the couch when they returned.
“How was dinner?”
His mother took off her coat.
“Good.”
His father looked at the protagonist.
“Expensive?”
“None of your business.”
His father smiled.
“So expensive.”
The protagonist laughed.
His mother went toward the kitchen.
His father lowered his voice.
“You pay?”
“Yeah.”
He nodded.
“Good.”
That was all.

The protagonist sat in the chair across from him.
Television on.
Sports.
Commercial.
Sports again.
His father did not ask how much.
Did not ask where the money came from.
Did not announce the debt satisfied.
The protagonist wanted to.
Almost.
Instead he watched television.

A few minutes later his father said:
“You got money to get back to school?”

The protagonist laughed.
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
“Okay.”
The protagonist looked over.
His father was still watching the game.
He understood, finally, that there was no ledger.
Not the kind he wanted.
The realization did not make him noble.
It did not make him stop counting money.
It did not prevent him from resenting future obligations or keeping track when other people owed him things.
He would remain capable of remembering a twenty-dollar debt longer than a hundred-dollar kindness.
Memory had its preferences.

His mother called from the kitchen.
“Who wants coffee?”
His father said:
“Me.”
The protagonist said:
“Me too.”
Then he stood.
“I'll make it.”
His mother appeared in the doorway.
“You know how?”
He looked offended.
“Yes.”
She laughed.
“Okay.”
He went into the kitchen.
Opened the cabinet.
Found the coffee.
Measured too much.

His mother corrected him.
He argued.
She ignored him.
His father yelled from the living room:
“Two ears!”
The protagonist froze.
His mother looked at him.
“What?”
He started laughing.
“Nothing.”
He made the coffee her way.

Chapter 22

“The Wrong Version of Me”

He saw Manny before Manny saw him.
That was the problem.
It happened at a party in an apartment overlooking Riverside Drive, the kind of apartment where people said things like the kitchen is small while standing in kitchens larger than some living rooms he knew.
The protagonist had been there forty minutes.
Long enough to become somebody.
Not entirely somebody else.
That would have been easier.
He had become a slightly adjusted version of himself.
Cleaner around the edges.
Less Bronx in the vowels.
More college in the pauses.
He had not consciously decided any of this.
Which made it more convincing.
There were perhaps twenty people in the apartment. Most were students or recent graduates. Somebody's parents owned the place. Someone else knew someone at Columbia. There were bottles on a dining table nobody seemed worried about damaging.
He was talking to a woman named Elizabeth.
Not Liz.
Elizabeth.
He had learned this within the first five minutes.

She was from Connecticut, studied history, and had somehow gotten him talking about architecture again.
Not because he had claimed to study it this time.
He had become more careful.
He simply knew things.
Buildings.
Streets.
How rooms changed people.
How certain entrances made you stand differently.
This was true.
He had spent his whole life entering rooms and changing.
Elizabeth was listening.
He liked that.
Then he looked past her shoulder.
Manny was standing near the door.

Manny wore jeans, sneakers, a leather jacket, and the expression of a man who had just discovered free entertainment.
The protagonist stopped speaking.
Elizabeth turned.
“You okay?”
“Yeah.”
Manny saw him.
There it was.
Recognition.
Then the smile.
Not friendly.
Not unfriendly.
Worse.
Interested.

The protagonist had no idea why Manny was there.
This was insulting.
He preferred understanding entrances before they happened.

Manny crossed the room.
Slowly.
He was with two people the protagonist vaguely recognized from home.
One of them knew someone.
Of course.
Everyone knew someone.
That was how half of New York operated before people began pretending networks were a new invention.
Manny reached him.
“Yo.”
The protagonist hugged him.
Quickly.
“What the fuck are you doing here?”
Manny looked around.
“Apparently ruining your evening.”
Elizabeth smiled.
The protagonist felt it.
Not danger.
Potential.

“This is Manny.”
Elizabeth held out her hand.
“Manny.”
“Manny,” Manny said.
He looked at the protagonist.
Then at Elizabeth.
Then back.
The protagonist knew that look.
Who are we tonight?
Manny did not say it.
Not yet.

Elizabeth asked:
“You guys grew up together?”

Manny answered before the protagonist.
“Yeah.”
The protagonist felt his stomach tighten.
“Bronx?”
Elizabeth asked.
Manny looked at him.
“Mostly.”
Mostly.
The word had a blade in it.
The protagonist smiled.
“What does that mean?”
Manny smiled back.
“Nothing.”
Elizabeth looked between them.
“You two are weird.”
“You have no idea,” Manny said.

The protagonist had told Elizabeth nothing technically false.
That mattered.
He had said he grew up in the Bronx.
True.
He had said his grandmother lived near Columbia.
True.
He had said he read constantly.
True.
He had said he played baseball.
True.
He had said he knew people who worked around clothes downtown.
That sentence was less stable.
He had said he had spent time in California as a kid.
This was the problem.
Not much.
Just enough.
A comment.

A story.
A memory improved by weather.
He could no longer remember why he had said it.
Possibly because Elizabeth had mentioned California.
Possibly because she liked California.
Possibly because he had once invented the biography so often that the story sometimes arrived before its source.

Manny asked:
“You still going to California?”
The protagonist looked at him.
There it was.
Elizabeth smiled.
“You go a lot?”
The protagonist could feel the room narrow.
Most people caught in a lie retreat toward the truth.
He considered this unimaginative.
“Not anymore.”
Manny nodded.
“Shame.”
The protagonist looked directly at him.
“I was there more when I was younger.”
Manny's face remained innocent.
Elizabeth asked:
“Family?”
The protagonist said:
“Sort of.”
Manny almost laughed.
The protagonist saw it.

He had choices.
Admit it.
Turn the whole thing into a joke.
Say he had made it up.
Let Elizabeth think him ridiculous.

Possible.
Or continue.
The mind can perform extraordinary work when reputation asks nicely.
“My father's side had people out there for a while.”
This was not precisely true.
But it possessed the architecture of truth.
Manny looked at him.
The protagonist looked back.
A silent agreement occurred.
Or perhaps only the protagonist believed it did.

Elizabeth said:
“That makes sense.”
Of course it did.
Anything made sense after enough structure.
Manny took a drink from someone passing with a tray.
“Yeah.”
He nodded.
“California.”
The protagonist wanted to kill him.

A man nearby joined the conversation.
Tall.
Blond.
Named Andrew.
Maybe twenty-three.
He had overheard architecture.
This was how the protagonist's evening became worse.
“You study architecture?”
“No.”
The protagonist answered immediately.
Good.
Progress.
Andrew said:

“Could've fooled me.”
Manny coughed.
The protagonist ignored him.
“I just like cities.”
Andrew nodded.
“Urban planning?”
“No.”
“Design?”
“No.”
Elizabeth laughed.
“He just knows things.”
Manny looked at the protagonist.
“That's true.”
This sounded supportive.
It wasn't.

Andrew began talking about Robert Moses.
The protagonist knew enough to participate.
Not enough to dominate.
This was healthy.
For approximately four minutes he managed well.
Then Manny wandered away.
Relief.
The protagonist returned to being the person he had been before the door opened.
Almost.

Elizabeth said:
“He's funny.”
“He thinks he is.”
“You're different around him.”
The protagonist looked over.
“How?”
She smiled.
“More…”

He waited.
“Normal.”
He laughed.
“What the fuck does that mean?”
“There.”
“What?”
“That.”
“What?”
“You didn't say ‘what does that mean.’ You said ‘what the fuck does that mean.’”
The protagonist stared.
Elizabeth laughed.
“You're studying me now.”
“No.”
“You are.”
He smiled.
Maybe.

Across the room Manny was talking to a woman and making her laugh.
The protagonist watched him.
Something unpleasant moved through him.
Jealousy?
Not romantic.
Territorial.
Manny had entered this room with no effort to become acceptable.
No altered posture.
No careful vocabulary.
No biography maintenance.
He simply stood there.
Manny.
This seemed arrogant.
Or enviable.
The protagonist had not decided which.

Elizabeth followed his eyes.
“You're worried about him.”
“No.”
“You are.”
“I'm not.”
“Then why do you keep looking?”
The protagonist took a drink.
“Because I know him.”
“That is generally how looking works.”
He laughed.
She had become irritating.
This increased his interest.

Manny eventually returned.
“Yo.”
“What?”
“Bathroom?”
The protagonist pointed.
Manny leaned closer.
“No, come here.”
They stepped into the hallway.
The protagonist closed the apartment door behind them.
Immediately:
“What the fuck are you doing?”
Manny looked genuinely confused.
“Going to a party.”
“You know what I mean.”
“No, I don't.”
“The California shit.”
Manny smiled.
“Oh.”
“Don't.”
“What?”
“You know.”

“You told her California?”
“It came up.”
Manny stared.
“It came up?”
“Yes.”
“Like the weather?”
“Shut up.”
Manny laughed.
The protagonist lowered his voice.
“I'm serious.”
“So am I. How does California come up?”
“I don't remember.”
“You forgot your own lie?”
“It's not exactly a lie.”
Manny's laughter stopped.
That interested him.
“What is it?”
The protagonist paused.
There were several answers available.
None survived contact with Manny's face.
“It's complicated.”
Manny began laughing again.
“Of course.”

The protagonist leaned against the wall.
“You don't understand.”
“No, I understand.”
“No, you don't.”
Manny looked at him.
“Then explain it.”
There it was.
Invitation.
Trap.
He took it.

“It wasn't like I sat down and decided to make up a whole life. Somebody asks something, you say something, then later it kind of becomes part of the story.”
Manny stared.
“That is making up a whole life.”
“No, because parts are true.”
“What parts?”
“I've been to California.”
Manny frowned.
“When?”
The protagonist paused.
“I mean eventually.”
Manny's face changed.
“Eventually?”
“That's not the point.”
“No, I think that's exactly the fucking point.”

Someone came into the hallway.
They moved aside.
Waited.
The person entered another apartment.
Manny looked back.
“Why don't you just say you're from the Bronx?”
“I do.”
“You also say California.”
“Sometimes.”
“Architecture?”
“I never said I was an architect.”
“You said you were studying architecture.”
“Once.”
Manny nodded.
“Blackie's manager?”
“That wasn't an identity.”
“What was it?”
The protagonist smiled despite himself.

“Operational.”
Manny laughed.
“See, this is why I keep you around.”

Then Manny got quiet.
Not angry.
That would have been easier.
“You know what's funny?”
“What?”
“You think you're hiding the Bronx.”
The protagonist straightened.
“I don't hide the Bronx.”
“I didn't say you do it all the time.”
“I don't.”
Manny shrugged.
“Okay.”
That word again.
The protagonist hated how often people used it when they had stopped caring whether he agreed.

“What are you saying?”
Manny looked at him.
“Sometimes you walk into these rooms like you're trying to prove you were always supposed to be there.”
The protagonist felt something immediate and ugly.
“And you don't?”
“No.”
“Bullshit.”
Manny nodded.
“Probably.”
“No, not probably. You do the same shit.”
“Maybe.”
“You change around people.”
“Of course.”
“You act different with women.”

“Yes.”
“With bosses.”
“Yes.”
“With family.”
“Yes.”
Manny looked at him.
“I'm not saying I don't.”
That stopped him.
Manny continued.
“I'm saying you make it sound like there's a reason.”
The protagonist laughed.
“There is a reason.”
“Exactly.”

They stood in the hallway.
The protagonist wanted to win.
He could feel it.
The old machinery starting.
Definitions.
Examples.
Counterexamples.
Everybody performs.
Language changes by context.
Code-switching.
Class.
Race.
Safety.
Ambition.
Identity.
All true.
All available.
He said:
“Everybody changes depending on the room.”
Manny nodded.
“Sure.”

“So what's the problem?”
“I didn't say there's a problem.”
“Then what are we arguing about?”
Manny smiled.
“You're arguing.”
The protagonist looked away.

Manny touched his shoulder.
“Relax.”
“I am relaxed.”
“You look like you're about to defend a dissertation.”
“Fuck you.”
“There he is.”

They went back inside.
Elizabeth was talking to Andrew.
The protagonist felt slighted.
This was ridiculous.
She had known him perhaps an hour.
He moved toward them anyway.
Manny disappeared into the kitchen.

Andrew was saying something about graduate school.
Elizabeth saw the protagonist.
“Everything okay?”
“Yeah.”
“Manny find the bathroom?”
The protagonist smiled.
“Eventually.”
She looked at him.
“California eventually?”
He froze.
Then realized she was joking.
Or mostly.
“You heard that?”

“No.”
She smiled.
“Your face.”
Fuck.

Andrew left.
Elizabeth said:
“So what's the California story?”
He looked at her.
Now.
There it was.
A clean opening.
He could tell the truth.
Not the philosophical truth.
The small one.
I made it up.
He could even make it funny.
Especially funny.
He was good at funny.

Instead:
“There's no story.”
Elizabeth waited.
The protagonist felt the lie become real simply because he had chosen it again.
“Family was there for a while.”
She nodded.
“Okay.”
No interrogation.
No suspicion.
The lie survived.
This should have relieved him.
It didn't.

They continued talking.

The evening recovered.
That almost made it worse.
She liked him.
Or seemed to.
He made her laugh.
She touched his arm once while saying something.
He wanted her approval.
There was no noble explanation.

Later they stood near a window.
The river was black beyond the glass.
Cars moving below.
Elizabeth asked:
“You ever think about leaving New York?”
“No.”
Immediate.
True.
“Never?”
“No.”
“Why?”
He looked outside.
“Because I hate everywhere else.”
She laughed.
“You haven't been everywhere else.”
“Exactly.”
This answer pleased him.
Too much.

Elizabeth asked:
“What do you want to do?”
There were safe answers.
Business.
Writing.
Something with baseball.
Maybe all three.

He had no idea.
“I don't know.”
She nodded.
“You seem like someone who knows.”
“That's mostly presentation.”
There.
Small truth.
She smiled.
“I know.”
He turned.
“What does that mean?”
“It means you talk like you've already decided what things mean.”
He laughed.
“Everybody keeps telling me variations of this.”
“Maybe everybody's right.”
“That's statistically unlikely.”

She looked toward Manny.
“He doesn't.”
“Doesn't what?”
“Seem like he's trying to convince anyone.”
The protagonist felt the old irritation.
“You've known him fifteen minutes.”
“So?”
“So you don't know him.”
“I didn't say I do.”
He almost continued.
Stopped.
Listened.

Elizabeth said:
“You seem protective of him.”
“I am.”
“And annoyed by him.”

“Very.”
“That's normal.”
The protagonist smiled.
“There you go.”
“What?”
“Calling something normal.”
“Would you prefer complicated?”
He laughed.
“No.”

Near two in the morning people began leaving.
Manny found him.
“We going?”
The protagonist looked at Elizabeth.
She looked back.
The choice presented itself.
Stay.
Go.
No transit disaster this time.
No Katherine.
No moral examination necessary.
He said:
“Yeah.”
Manny nodded.
Elizabeth said:
“You leaving?”
“Yeah.”
She wrote a number on a piece of paper.
Landline.
Of course.
“Call me.”
He put it in his pocket.
Manny watched.
Said nothing.
This restraint was suspicious.

Outside, cold.
They walked toward the subway.
For half a block Manny was silent.
Then:
“Elizabeth.”
“Don't.”
“Connecticut.”
“Don't.”
“Architecture.”
“I didn't say architecture.”
Manny laughed.
“California.”
“Fuck you.”

They reached Broadway.
The protagonist walked faster.
Manny caught up.
“You calling her?”
“I don't know.”
“You got Ana.”
The protagonist looked over.
“I know.”
“Just checking.”
“I don't need you checking.”
“Good.”
They kept walking.

At the station the stairs smelled like old urine and winter air.
Manny put a token in.
The protagonist followed.
On the platform they waited.
No train.
A few other people.
Someone reading a newspaper.

A couple arguing quietly.
A man asleep on a bench.

Manny said:
“You know I wasn't trying to embarrass you.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“I know.”
This was true.
“Then why you mad?”
“I'm not mad.”
Manny stared.
“Okay.”
“Stop saying okay.”
Manny laughed.

The protagonist sat on the bench.
Manny remained standing.
After a while:
“You really think I hide the Bronx?”
Manny looked down at him.
“I think sometimes you introduce it before anybody can use it against you.”
The protagonist said nothing.
That was different.
Manny continued.
“Sometimes you make it the first thing about you. Sometimes the last thing. Depends where you are.”
The protagonist looked toward the tracks.
“Everybody does that.”
“Probably.”
“You do.”
“Yes.”
Again.
No defense.
It was infuriating.

“So what's your point?”
Manny thought.
Then shrugged.
“I don't know.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“That's it?”
“Yeah.”
“You start this whole conversation and you don't know?”
“Maybe there ain't a point.”
The protagonist laughed.
“That's convenient.”
Manny sat beside him.
“You always need a point.”
“Stories need points.”
“Who said this is a story?”

The train arrived.
They got on.
Mostly empty.
Manny took one side.
The protagonist the other.
The car shook north.
For several stops they didn't talk.

At 96th Street a group of Columbia students got on.
The protagonist noticed immediately.
Or believed they were Columbia students.
Coats.
Books.
Conversation.
One of the women was beautiful.
Naturally.
She sat across from him.
Manny saw him notice.

Smiled.
The protagonist ignored him.

The woman glanced at them once.
Nothing more.
The train moved.
Manny leaned over.
“Townie.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Shut the fuck up.”
The woman looked toward them.
The protagonist lowered his voice.
Manny's smile widened.
There it was again.
Adjustment.
Small.
Automatic.

He caught himself.
Then looked at Manny.
Manny had caught it too.
Neither said anything.
That was worse.

The woman got off at 110th.
The protagonist watched her leave.
Manny looked at him.
“Grandma's neighborhood.”
“Don't.”
Manny laughed.

Later, alone in his old room, the protagonist emptied his pockets.
A few dollars.
A subway token.

Elizabeth's number.
He placed the number on the desk.
Looked at it.
Ana existed.
That was true.
Elizabeth also existed.
Also true.
He did not call either.
Not that night.

He lay down.
The party returned.
Not Elizabeth first.
Manny.
The hallway.
You walk into these rooms like you're trying to prove you were always supposed to be there.
He disliked the sentence because it sounded like something he might have written.
That made it difficult to dismiss.

He tried to decide whether Manny was right.
Then caught himself trying to make the evening submit a conclusion.
He stopped.
Mostly.

The next morning his mother knocked.
“You awake?”
“Yeah.”
“Come eat.”
“I’m coming.”
He remained in bed.
She opened the door.
“You're not moving.”

“I’m thinking.”
“About what?”
He looked at the ceiling.
“Who I am.”
His mother stared at him.
Then:
“Come eat before who you are gets cold.”
She closed the door.
The protagonist laughed.
He got up.

At breakfast his father was reading the newspaper.
His mother put food down.
Nobody asked about the party.
Nobody asked which version of him had attended.
Nobody cared whether he had sounded more educated, more Bronx, more sophisticated, more ridiculous, more honest.
His father turned a page.
His mother told him to eat before it got cold.
The protagonist ate.
For several minutes there was nothing to perform.
He found this peaceful.
Then uncomfortable.
Then peaceful again.

Chapter 23

“Earned”

The job came through Peter.
This fact became less important every time the protagonist told the story.
At first it was:
Peter knows somebody.
Then:
I heard about something through school.
Later:
I interviewed for a position.
Eventually:
I got a job in Manhattan.
All true.
Increasingly incomplete.
This is how autobiography improves with age.
Not necessarily by becoming false.
By becoming aerodynamic.

Peter mentioned the job over breakfast.
He was eating cereal.
“My father knows a guy.”
The protagonist looked up.
“Of course he does.”
Peter ignored that.
“Company downtown. They need somebody part-time.”
“What kind of company?”
“Consulting.”

“That means nothing.”
“I know.”
“What do they consult?”
Peter shrugged.
“Businesses.”
The protagonist stared.
“That somehow means less.”
Peter kept eating.
“They need somebody who can write, talk to people, organize shit.”
“Why are you telling me?”
“Because you're good at two of those.”
“Which two?”
“Talking and shit.”
The protagonist threw a napkin at him.

Peter's father knew a guy.
There are entire libraries explaining why this sentence matters.
Some use phrases like social capital.
Some prefer networks.
Others, depending upon temperament and how much they dislike wealthy people, might begin speaking about reproduction of class advantage.
The narrator has read enough of these books to become insufferable at dinner.
This is not nothing.
It is also not the same as wisdom.
At the time, the protagonist simply needed a job.

The interview was the following Tuesday.
He owned one decent jacket.
Not a suit.
A jacket.
He borrowed Peter's tie.

This bothered him more than the job itself.
Peter stood behind him while he tried to knot it.
“You're choking yourself.”
“I know.”
“No. You're literally choking yourself.”
“I know.”
“Move.”
Peter tied it for him.
The protagonist looked in the mirror.
The tie changed him.
Not physically.
Permission.
He suddenly looked like someone who could enter buildings with guards.
This annoyed him.
He adjusted the knot.
Peter said:
“You look employable.”
“Fuck you.”
“Try not to say that.”

The company occupied part of a floor in a building where the elevator moved quietly enough to imply money.
The receptionist sat behind a desk with no visible clutter.
He noticed this.
People with money hid paper.
People without money stacked it.
This theory was based on perhaps four offices and his mother's kitchen table.
The protagonist considered the sample size adequate.

A man named Bernstein interviewed him.
Mid-forties.
Glasses.
Expensive watch.

Not flashy.
The absence of flash made the protagonist notice it more.
Bernstein had his résumé.
The protagonist had stared at that résumé for two hours the previous night.
Every line was true.
This felt strangely vulnerable.

“So Peter tells me you're a writer.”
The protagonist smiled.
“I write.”
“That wasn't my question.”
Good.
He liked Bernstein immediately.
“I've had something published.”
“Campus?”
“Yes.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Baseball too.”
“Yes.”
“Still playing?”
“Yes.”
“What position?”
He answered.
Bernstein leaned back.
“You any good?”
There it was again.
A question requiring either confidence or ritual modesty.
The protagonist said:
“Yes.”
Bernstein smiled.
“Good.”

The interview continued.
School.

Work.
Writing.
Bernstein asked about Sal.
The protagonist described the job.
Inventory.
Customers.
Boxes.
Register.
Hours.
Bernstein said:
“What did you learn there?”
The protagonist almost answered with a speech.
Work ethic.
Responsibility.
People.
Class.
Money.
Humility.
A paragraph had already assembled itself behind his teeth.
He killed it.
“To show up.”
Bernstein looked at him.
“That’s a good answer.”
The protagonist felt pleased.
Dangerously pleased.
Praise worked on him even when he knew praise worked on him.
Self-awareness, like a smoke alarm without batteries, had certain limitations.

Then Bernstein asked:
“Why do you want this job?”
Money.
Experience.
Manhattan.

Curiosity.
Résumé.
Access.
Clothes.
Respect.
He said:
“I want to see how decisions get made.”
Bernstein nodded.
“That's better than ‘I want experience.’”
The protagonist smiled.
He had won that round.
There should not have been rounds.
He created them anyway.

The interview lasted thirty-five minutes.
At the end Bernstein said:
“I like you.”
The protagonist nodded.
“Thank you.”
“Peter says you're sharp.”
The protagonist felt the word.
Not reliable.
Not kind.
Not decent.
Sharp.
Excellent word for a nineteen-year-old who already worried that intelligence might be visible.
Bernstein continued.
“I need someone who can listen, write cleanly, and not panic when people are vague.”
The protagonist nearly laughed at the first requirement.
Instead:
“I can do that.”
Bernstein looked at him.
“Can you?”

The protagonist paused.
“Yes.”
This time the answer had to pass through more rooms before leaving him.

They hired him.
Part-time.
Three afternoons a week.
More money than Sal paid.
Cleaner clothes.
No boxes.
The protagonist called home first.
His mother answered.
“I got the job.”
“What job?”
Of course.
He had not told them about the interview.
He explained.
She became excited immediately.
“How much?”
He told her.
Silence.
Then:
“That's good.”
“Yes.”
“Very good.”
He could hear her recalculating something.
Possibility.
Relief.
Groceries.
Bills.
Pride.
Perhaps none of these.
Perhaps she was simply happy.

The narrator would like to remind himself that not every silence requires interpretation.
He will fail at this repeatedly.

His father came on.
“You got a job?”
“Yes.”
“In Manhattan?”
“Yes.”
“Doing what?”
The protagonist explained.
His father listened.
Then:
“You know what you're doing?”
The protagonist laughed.
“No.”
“Good.”
“What does that mean?”
“Means they haven't ruined you yet.”
The protagonist smiled.
Then his father asked:
“How'd you get it?”
The protagonist said:
“Through school.”
Pause.
Not false.
His father said:
“Good.”
They moved on.
The protagonist felt something tiny and unpleasant.
Not guilt.
Editing.

He told Manny that weekend.
They were sitting in a car outside a bodega.

“I got this job downtown.”
“What job?”
He explained.
Manny whistled.
“Look at you.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Big time.”
“Suit?”
“Not exactly.”
“Tie?”
“Sometimes.”
Manny laughed.
“California architect finally got hired.”
“Fuck you.”

“How'd you get it?”
The protagonist opened his mouth.
“Through school.”
Manny looked at him.
“That mean somebody knew somebody?”
The protagonist stared.
Manny smiled.
“I'm learning.”
“Peter's father knew a guy.”
“There it is.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No, say it.”
Manny shrugged.
“You always make the bridge disappear after you cross it.”
The protagonist frowned.
“What the fuck does that mean?”
Manny pointed through the windshield.
“That.”
“What?”

“Peter's father.”
“I still had to interview.”
“I didn't say you didn't.”
“I still had to get hired.”
“I know.”
“I still have to do the job.”
Manny nodded.
“Probably.”
The protagonist was irritated now.
“Then what's your point?”
Manny opened the door.
“No point.”
He got out.
The protagonist remained in the car.
He hated when Manny refused to finish arguments he had started.
It deprived him of victory.

There is an easy version of this scene.
Peter had access.
The protagonist benefited.
Therefore the protagonist's merit is compromised.
Very neat.
Very modern.
Very satisfying to people who enjoy reducing human beings to diagrams.
One could invoke Pierre Bourdieu here, if one wanted to ruin a perfectly good afternoon.
Networks matter.
Inherited advantage matters.
Cultural familiarity matters.
Knowing which tie to borrow matters.
Knowing that one is supposed to own a tie matters.
Knowing somebody who knows somebody matters.
All true.

It is also an obnoxious thing to tell a nineteen-year-old who has worked his ass off.
He still had to walk into the room.
He still had to answer the questions.
He still had to become useful once inside.
The narrator knows this.
The narrator also enjoys catching the protagonist simplifying his own story.
These motives should not be mistaken for objectivity.

The office was quieter than any workplace the protagonist knew.
No shouting.
No machinery.
No radio.
No customers asking where something was.
People disappeared behind doors and emerged with decisions.
The protagonist found this mysterious.
For the first two weeks he mostly typed.
Summaries.
Notes.
Letters.
Meeting memos.
He hated the word memo.
Then began using it naturally.
This happened faster than expected.

Bernstein corrected his writing aggressively.
“Too long.”
Another page:
“Too clever.”
Another:
“Who are you trying to impress?”
The protagonist felt personally attacked by a margin.

He rewrote.
Bernstein returned it.
“Better.”
That one word carried enough force to sustain him through lunch.
He resented this.

One afternoon Bernstein handed him three pages of handwritten notes.
“Turn this into one page.”
The handwriting was nearly illegible.
“What is this about?”
Bernstein said:
“If you can tell me, you're halfway done.”
Then left.
The protagonist read.
Read again.
Numbers.
Names.
Fragments.
He made calls.
Asked questions.
Listened.
Actually listened.
By five o'clock he had one page.
Bernstein read it standing.
Made one mark.
“Good.”
The protagonist walked to the subway feeling six inches taller.

That night he told Ana.
She was happy for him.
Genuinely.
“You sound excited.”

“I am.”
“You like it?”
“So far.”
“What do you do?”
He explained.
Unlike with his parents, he made it sound interesting.
Not dishonestly.
Selectively.
Decision-making.
Writing.
People.
Clients.
He did not mention copying numbers from one page to another for an hour.
Ana said:
“That sounds like you.”
The protagonist liked this.
“What does?”
“Getting paid to explain things.”
He laughed.
“Basically.”
Then she said:
“Peter helped you get it, right?”
Small question.
Nothing underneath it.
He felt defensive anyway.
“His father knew somebody.”
“That's what I mean.”
“I still had to interview.”
Ana paused.
“I know.”
“I wasn't just handed the job.”
“I didn't say you were.”
“I'm just saying.”
“I know.”

There it was again.
He heard himself.
Too late.

Ana said:
“Why are you defending it?”
“I'm not.”
“You are.”
He looked at the receiver.
“No, I just don't want it to sound like I got it because somebody did me a favor.”
“Didn't somebody do you a favor?”
That word bothered him.
Favor.
Too soft.
Too personal.
Too close to charity.
“No.”
Ana waited.
“Peter told me about an opening.”
“And?”
“His father recommended me.”
“And?”
“I interviewed.”
Ana said:
“Okay.”
He exhaled.
“See?”
“See what?”
“I earned it.”
Silence.
Then:
“I didn't say you didn't.”

That sentence followed him for days.

He did not like what it implied.
Not that he hadn't earned the job.
That earning it and being helped might coexist.
This was messy accounting.
He preferred categories that did not touch.
Help.
Merit.
Luck.
Effort.
Privilege.
Skill.
As though life's ingredients remained politely separated on the plate.

Bernstein began bringing him into meetings.
Not important meetings.
Meetings adjacent to important meetings.
He sat near the wall.
Took notes.
Watched.
A company owner complained about labor costs.
Another man talked about productivity.
Someone mentioned closing a location.
Someone else said margins.
The protagonist wrote the words.
He understood some.
Not all.
Afterward he asked Bernstein:
“They're going to close it?”
“Maybe.”
“How many people work there?”
Bernstein looked at him.
“I don't know.”
“How can they talk about closing it if they don't know?”
Bernstein paused.

Then:
“Because they're not discussing people.”
The protagonist stared.
Bernstein gathered papers.
“They're discussing a location.”
“People work at the location.”
“Yes.”
“So—”
Bernstein looked at him.
“Don't confuse abstraction with cruelty.”
The protagonist stopped.
Bernstein continued:
“And don't confuse abstraction with innocence either.”
Then he walked out.
The protagonist remained sitting.
That was irritatingly good.

There are books about this too.
Naturally.
There are always books.
Entire disciplines devoted to the distance between a spreadsheet and the human being represented by a number on it.
Economists have spent careers explaining incentives.
Sociologists have spent careers explaining institutions.
Philosophers have spent centuries asking what one human being owes another.
Managers discovered PowerPoint later and briefly threatened to settle the matter.
None of them were in the room.
The protagonist was.
He had to write the memo.

Later he typed:

“Management is considering consolidation due to inefficiencies at the northern site.”
He stared at the sentence.
Clean.
Accurate.
Nobody in it.
He almost changed it.
Did not.
That was the language the meeting required.
This fact comforted him.
Too much.

A week later Sal asked whether he was quitting.
The protagonist had reduced his shifts.
“Not quitting.”
“You got your fancy job.”
“It's not fancy.”
“You wear a tie.”
“Sometimes.”
Sal pointed.
“Fancy.”
The protagonist laughed.
Sal said:
“You making more?”
“Yes.”
“Good.”
No jealousy.
No resentment.
This disappointed some defensive part of him that had prepared for both.
Sal continued:
“You should go.”
“Go where?”
“Wherever this takes you.”
“I’m still working here.”

“For now.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“You trying to get rid of me?”
“Yes.”
Sal smiled.
The protagonist laughed.
Then Sal said:
“Don't become one of those people.”
“What people?”
“You know.”
“No.”
“The people that forget who carried boxes.”
The protagonist smiled.
“I carry boxes.”
Sal pointed at him.
“Exactly.”

He told himself Sal was joking.
Sal probably was.
That did not prevent the sentence from staying.

A month into the job Bernstein asked him to draft a letter to a client.
The client owed money.
The protagonist wrote three paragraphs.
Professional.
Firm.
Elegant.
Bernstein read it.
“You sound like a lawyer.”
“Good?”
“No.”
He crossed out half.
“You're hiding the request.”
“What request?”

“Pay us.”
The protagonist laughed.
Bernstein looked at him.
“Say what you mean.”
The phrase irritated him by now.
Everybody had apparently formed a committee.

He rewrote:
“We have not yet received payment for Invoice 317. Please remit the outstanding balance by October 15.”
Bernstein nodded.
“There.”
“That’s it?”
“That’s it.”
The protagonist stared at the page.
“Feels rude.”
“It's a bill.”
Another form of accounting.

He became good at the job.
Actually good.
This matters.
The narrator would be cheating if he pretended otherwise.
The protagonist learned quickly.
Remembered names.
Asked useful questions.
Could take a messy conversation and produce a clean page.
People began giving him more.
Bernstein trusted him.
Reception knew him.
He stopped feeling like a visitor in the elevator.
Then stopped noticing the elevator.
This happened faster than he would later remember.

He bought a shirt.

Not expensive.
Expensive to him.
He told himself it was for work.
It fit correctly.
Materialism suffered another tactical setback.

One afternoon a senior employee named Howard asked where he went to school.
The protagonist told him.
Howard nodded.
“Good school.”
Then:
“Your family in business?”
“No.”
“What does your father do?”
The protagonist answered.
Howard said:
“Ah.”
Just that.
Ah.
The protagonist heard class in it.
Maybe it was there.
Maybe he supplied it.
He immediately wanted to become more impressive.
This was one of his less dignified reflexes.

“I've been working since high school.”
Howard nodded.
“Good.”
“I play baseball too.”
“College?”
“Yes.”
“That's impressive.”
There.
The protagonist relaxed.

He had repaired something nobody else knew was damaged.

At lunch he caught himself thinking:
I belong here.
Good thought.
Then:
I earned this.
Also good.
Then:
Anybody could do this if they—
He stopped.
There it was.
The cliff.
He knew enough now to recognize it.
Not avoid it.
Recognize it.

Anybody could do this if they what?
Worked hard?
Peter worked hard.
Marcus worked hard.
Sal worked hard.
His mother worked hard.
His father worked hard.
Maria worked hard.
Work was not rare.
The opportunity to have one's work noticed in the correct room was rarer.
The opportunity to enter the room was rarer still.
And here the narrator becomes tempted again.
This is where he could drag in theories about meritocracy.
He could mention Michael Young, who coined the word in satire before later generations began wearing it as a medal.
He could bring in Weber and Protestant work ethic.

Perhaps Rawls might wander through, asking whether anybody would design the rules from behind a veil of ignorance.
The narrator has read all kinds of shit.
This is impressive primarily to the narrator.
The protagonist, meanwhile, had to be at work by one.

That weekend Manny asked for help writing a résumé.
The protagonist said yes.
They sat at Manny's kitchen table.
Manny had work history.
More than the protagonist expected.
Not because Manny had hidden it.
Because the protagonist had not asked.
Warehouse.
Delivery.
Retail.
Seasonal construction.
A cousin's business.
The protagonist began rewriting.
“Managed inventory flow.”
Manny looked at him.
“I moved boxes.”
“That's inventory flow.”
“No, it's boxes.”
“Companies like this language.”
Manny smiled.
“California.”
“Shut up.”

They worked.
The protagonist made the résumé better.
Much better.
Manny read it.
“Who the fuck is this?”

“You.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“I sound important.”
“You were important.”
“I moved boxes.”
“You kept the place running.”
Manny looked at him.
“That's what Sal tell you?”
The protagonist stared.
“How do you know Sal?”
“You talk.”
“Right.”
Manny tapped the résumé.
“So this is how it works?”
“What?”
“You make regular shit sound like rich people did it.”
The protagonist laughed.
“That is an offensively accurate description.”
Manny pointed at one line.
“‘Coordinated logistics.’”
“You coordinated logistics.”
“I drove a van.”
“Exactly.”
They both laughed.

Then Manny got quiet.
“You think this gets me an interview?”
“Yeah.”
“You sure?”
“No.”
“Good.”
The protagonist smiled.

The résumé worked.

Not immediately.
Two weeks later Manny got a call.
Then an interview.
Then a job offer.
Better pay.
Not miraculous.
Better.
Manny called.
“I got it.”
The protagonist stood from his desk.
“Yo!”
People in the office looked over.
He lowered his voice.
“That's fucking great.”
“Yeah.”
“You see?”
“See what?”
“The résumé.”
Manny laughed.
“Here we go.”
“What?”
“You already taking credit.”
The protagonist stopped.
Manny was still laughing.
“I’m fucking with you.”
The protagonist smiled.
Mostly.

That night he thought about it.
Manny had experience.
Manny had done the work.
The protagonist had translated it.
Somebody else had agreed to interview him.
Somebody else had hired him.
Maybe somebody inside knew somebody.

Maybe timing.
Maybe another candidate canceled.
Maybe Manny crushed the interview.
Probably.
Success had many parents.
Failure somehow arrived an orphan.

The protagonist began noticing how often success stories were told backward.
A man built a business and suddenly every childhood hustle became prophecy.
A professor published a book and every rejection became necessary preparation.
An athlete made a team and every lonely practice had apparently been placed there by destiny.
Nobody knew which sacrifices would pay.
That was obvious.
Everybody spoke later as though they had.
The protagonist was no exception.
Perhaps worse.
He had better sentences.

This is another place where the narrator could become superior.
He could point out survivorship bias.
He could mention Kahneman, although the chronology would object and the protagonist would have no idea who the hell that was yet.
The narrator has the advantage of hindsight.
This is an unfair advantage and should be taxed heavily.
It is easy to sit decades later with books stacked nearby and diagnose the vanity of a nineteen-year-old trying to figure out whether he deserved his own life.
Much harder to be nineteen.
The narrator, inconveniently, no longer is.

Months after Peter first mentioned the job over cereal, the protagonist sat in Bernstein's office.
Bernstein was reviewing something.
Without looking up:
“You graduating when?”
The protagonist told him.
“You know what you're doing after?”
“No.”
“Good.”
The protagonist smiled.
“You say that every time I don't know something.”
“Most young people lie.”
“About knowing?”
“About everything.”
The protagonist laughed.
Bernstein looked up.
“What do you want?”
There it was.
Writing.
Baseball.
Money.
Business.
New York.
Respect.
Freedom.
A life that looked like his own.
“I don't know.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Then don't make the first decent opportunity into destiny.”
The protagonist said nothing.
Bernstein returned to the paper.
“You're good here.”
The protagonist felt it.
Praise.

Danger.
“Thank you.”
“You're smart.”
More.
“Thank you.”
“You work hard.”
More.
“Thank you.”
“And Peter's father got you in the door.”
There.
The protagonist's body tightened before his mind did.
Bernstein saw it.
Smiled.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Bullshit.”
The protagonist laughed.

Bernstein leaned back.
“You think that makes the rest less true?”
“No.”
Fast.
Too fast.
Bernstein waited.
The protagonist looked away.
“Maybe.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Then you're an idiot.”
The protagonist laughed.
Bernstein did not.
“Somebody opens a door, walk through it.”
He pointed toward the office.
“Then do something once you're inside.”
The protagonist listened.
No proverb.

No theory.
Door.
Walk.
Work.

Bernstein said:
“The people who pretend nobody opened a door for them are usually the same people who start locking doors behind them.”
The protagonist looked at him.
That one he did not laugh at.

Now, because the narrator has temporarily become unbearable, let us overwork the metaphor.
Doors are wonderfully convenient because everyone can see them.
Far fewer people notice who owns the building.
Who knows the address.
Who has been told the meeting is happening.
Who knows which entrance to use.
Who recognizes the doorman.
Who has clothes that prevent security from becoming curious.
Who has been taught that one is allowed to knock.
Who can afford to stand outside long enough to wait.
All relevant.
All true.
Also true:
At some point someone still has to walk through the fucking door.
The protagonist did.
That matters too.

On the subway home he thought about Peter.
Peter's father.

Bernstein.
Sal.
His father sending train money.
His mother letting him buy dinner.
Marcus driving back.
Teachers.
Coaches.
Manny.
Ana.
People who had said yes.
People who had warned him.
People who had carried something while he was busy becoming the person who would later describe carrying it.
The list became irritatingly long.
Then another thought arrived.
He had worked too.
Hard.
This mattered.
He refused to surrender it.
Good.
He did not need to.
That was the part his pride had misunderstood.
Gratitude was not theft.
Help did not erase effort.
Effort did not erase help.
The arithmetic remained ugly.

The narrator would like to claim the protagonist understood this completely.
He did not.
He understood it on the subway.
That is not the same thing.
By Thursday he would probably tell the job story again and leave Peter's father out.
By twenty-five he might put him back in.

By forty he might tell the story differently still.
Memory revises invoices.
Everybody makes up accounting.
His father had already told him that.
The narrator has apparently spent several thousand words catching up.

At work the next morning, the protagonist rode the elevator up.
Tie.
Good shirt.
Folder under his arm.
A man in a suit entered at another floor.
They nodded.
For years the protagonist had imagined belonging would feel like arrival.
Mostly it felt like knowing which button to press.
The doors opened.
He stepped out.
The receptionist said:
“Morning.”
“Morning.”
He walked toward his desk.
Nobody applauded.
Nobody asked how he got there.
Peter's father remained absent from the hallway.
So did Sal.
So did his parents.
So did everybody who had built some invisible portion of the road.
The protagonist sat.
Opened the folder.
Started working.
For once, earning something did not require pretending he had earned it alone.

And because the narrator has already shown off far too much, we will leave it there.

Chapter 24

“The Better Explanation”

Ana said it on a Sunday.
Not during a fight.
That would have helped.
They were walking.
Cold enough for coats.
Not so cold that either of them wanted to admit they were uncomfortable.
The protagonist had come home for the weekend.
They had spent most of Saturday together.
Dinner.
Walking.
Talking.
Nothing dramatic.
On Sunday afternoon, near a corner they had passed hundreds of times, Ana said:
“I don't think I trust you the way I used to.”
The protagonist stopped.
Ana kept walking three steps before noticing.
Then turned.
“What?”
She looked tired.
Not angry.
That was worse.

“What do you mean?”
“I mean what I said.”

“Because of Katherine?”
“Not just Katherine.”
Nothing had happened with Katherine.
He almost said this.
Caught himself.
Progress.
Tiny.
He walked toward her.
“What else?”
Ana looked at him.
There were questions that were invitations.
This was not one.

“I don't know.”
“You just said you don't trust me.”
“I know.”
“So what does that mean?”
Ana exhaled.
He heard the sigh.
He disliked the sigh.
Then disliked himself for disliking it.
Then disliked the fact that he had noticed both reactions while still waiting for her answer.
His mind had become crowded with mirrors.

Ana said:
“You always have an explanation.”
The protagonist almost laughed.
Not because it was funny.
Because the sentence was so familiar.
“That’s bad?”
“Sometimes.”
“How?”
“You can make anything sound reasonable.”
He looked at her.

“That doesn't mean it isn't reasonable.”
“I know.”
There it was.
The phrase that increasingly seemed to mean: I have already heard the defense.

Ana started walking again.
He followed.
She said:
“Katherine.”
“Nothing happened.”
“I know.”
“Manny's car.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No, say it.”
He had begun listing evidence before she had finished.
He knew this.
Continued anyway.
“I told you about her.”
“After.”
“I still told you.”
Ana stopped.
“See?”
“What?”
“You need credit for telling me.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“I was being honest.”
“You were being partially honest.”
He felt the heat.
“What's that supposed to mean?”
“It means you told me enough so that if I ever found out more, you could say you'd already told me.”
He stared at her.

“That’s bullshit.”
“Maybe.”
“It is.”
Ana nodded.
“Okay.”
He hated okay.

“You think I cheated on you?”
“No.”
“Then what are we talking about?”
Ana looked at him for a long time.
Then:
“That's exactly the problem.”
The protagonist laughed once, sharply.
“That makes no sense.”
“I know.”
“You keep saying that.”
“Because you keep saying things I already understand.”
“Then explain it to me.”
The sentence came out harder than he intended.
Ana looked away.
There were people passing them.
A woman carrying a shopping bag.
Two kids on bikes.
A man smoking outside a store.
The city, as usual, declined to stop for their relationship.

Ana said:
“I don't think you're lying all the time.”
“Good.”
“I think you tell the truth in a way that protects you.”
He opened his mouth.
Closed it.
Ana continued.
“You decide which parts matter.”

“Everybody does that.”
“I know.”
There it was again.
No argument.
No opening.

They walked.
The protagonist could feel himself assembling something.
Context.
Intent.
Complexity.
Fear.
Distance.
College.
Growing up.
Attention.
Loneliness.
He had material.
Excellent material.
He could make a strong case.
This should have alarmed him more.

“Ana.”
She looked over.
“I know I've fucked up.”
She waited.
“I know I overexplain.”
Still waiting.
“I know I get defensive.”
She nodded.
“I know sometimes I want credit for being honest.”
Her face softened slightly.
He saw it.
Kept going.
This was the mistake.

“But I think you're making it sound like I'm manipulating everything, and that's not fair.”
There.
He felt the whole thing collapse as soon as it left him.
Ana's face closed again.
Not dramatically.
Just enough.

“I didn't say that.”
“I know, but that's what you're implying.”
“No. That's what you're hearing.”
He stopped walking.
She stopped too.

“I’m trying to listen.”
“I know.”
“I am.”
“I know.”
“Then what am I missing?”
Ana looked at him.
“You keep turning what I feel into a case you can win.”
The protagonist said nothing.

Ana continued.
“I don't care whether you technically cheated.”
That hurt.
He had depended on technically.
“I care that I don't know what version of you I'm getting.”
The protagonist stared.
The old phrase.
Versions.
Manny.
California.
Architecture.
College.

Bronx.
Good son.
Good boyfriend.
Good guy.

“I’m the same person.”
Ana looked at him.
“Are you?”
He felt anger rise.
Not because she was wrong.
Because the question frightened him.

“You know me better than anybody.”
“That’s not the same thing.”
“What does that mean?”
Ana shook her head.
“You always do that.”
“Do what?”
“Make me explain the thing until you're comfortable with it.”
“I’m trying to understand.”
“No. You're trying to get it into your language.”
That landed.
Hard.

They crossed the street.
Neither spoke.
At the next corner Ana said:
“You know what I think?”
“What?”
“I think sometimes you listen to me so you can rewrite me.”
He stopped.
Ana kept walking.
This time he followed.

He wanted to say that was unfair.

He wanted to say she misunderstood his intentions.
He wanted to say he had changed.
He had.
Actually.
He listened more.
Interrupted less.
Asked better questions.
Told more truth.
Not all.
More.
Did those things count?
Yes.
Did they erase the rest?
No.
The arithmetic remained ugly.

They ended up at a diner.
Not because either was hungry.
Because walking had become too cold.
They sat in a booth.
Coffee.
Nothing else.
The waitress looked disappointed.
The protagonist almost apologized.
Did not.

Ana stirred sugar into her coffee.
The protagonist watched.
He knew she took one sugar.
She was using two.
He almost asked why.
Stopped.
This is what progress looked like now.
Restraint around sugar.

Ana said:
“I love you.”
The protagonist looked up.
There are sentences that should comfort.
This one did not.
“I love you too.”
“I know.”
Again.
He almost smiled.
Could not.

Ana said:
“I don't know if that's enough.”
The protagonist felt panic.
Immediate.
Pure.
No theory first.
“No.”
Ana looked at him.
“No what?”
“No, we're not doing that.”
“Doing what?”
“This thing where you decide it's over because things are hard.”
Ana's face changed.
Not anger.
Sadness.
He heard himself.
Control.
Again.

“I didn't say it's over.”
“Then don't say shit like that.”
“I’m telling you how I feel.”
“I know.”

“Stop saying that.”
Ana looked down.
The protagonist immediately regretted it.

“I’m sorry.”
Ana nodded.
He waited.
Nothing.
The protagonist had become accustomed to apologies behaving like keys.
This one opened nothing.

He said:
“I don't want to lose you.”
Ana looked at him.
There.
No explanation.
No framework.
Good.
He should have stopped.
He did not.
“I think part of what you're reacting to is that college changed me.”
Ana closed her eyes.
He saw it.
Still continued.
“Not changed me like I'm better or anything, but I'm around different people, different ideas, and maybe I sound different —”
Ana opened her eyes.
“Do you hear yourself?”
The protagonist stopped.
Finally.

The waitress brought more coffee.

Nobody had asked.
She poured.
The protagonist thanked her.
Ana did too.
The waitress left.
They watched steam rise.

Ana said:
“You're explaining why I feel the way I feel.”
He looked down.
There it was.
So simple.
Embarrassingly simple.
He had listened to Rachel.
To Marcus.
To his mother.
To Sal.
To Bernstein.
To Manny.
He had learned to wait.
Learned to ask.
Learned to hear.
And still, when afraid, he turned another person's feeling into territory.
Something to map.
Something to manage.

“I’m scared.”
The words surprised him.
Ana looked at him.
He said it again.
“I’m scared.”
“What of?”
He almost answered with ten things.
Instead:

“You leaving.”
Ana looked down.
The protagonist felt naked in a way sex had never accomplished.

“I don't know if I am.”
That was worse.
He nodded.
Actually nodded.
No argument.

Ana said:
“I don't want you to become somebody else.”
He smiled faintly.
“I don't know who the first somebody was.”
She looked at him.
That almost broke something.

For a while they said nothing.
The diner filled.
People came in.
People left.
A man at the counter argued about a check.
A child dropped a spoon.
Someone put coins in a jukebox.
Music played.
The protagonist knew the song.
He did not comment.

Ana said:
“You know what I miss?”
“What?”
“When you were just stupid.”
He laughed.
Actually laughed.

She did too.
The first real laugh in an hour.
“What does that mean?”
“You were easier.”
“That's insulting.”
“I know.”
He smiled.
Then:
“I miss it too.”

They left the diner.
The air had gotten colder.
Ana put her hands in her pockets.
The protagonist wanted to hold one.
Did not.
After half a block she reached for his.
He took it.
No interpretation.
Not immediately.

At her building they stopped.
Ana looked up at him.
“I need some space.”
There it was.
The sentence.
No room around it.
He hated it.
“How much?”
She almost laughed.
“I don't know.”
“Like days?”
“Don't.”
He closed his eyes.
“Right.”

Ana said:
“I don't want you calling every night.”
“Okay.”
“I mean it.”
“I know.”
She looked at him.
He caught himself.
“Sorry.”
She smiled sadly.
“Good night.”
“Good night.”
They hugged.
Not long.
Not short.
Then she went inside.
The protagonist stood on the sidewalk.
Did not wait for a light.
Did not stare up at the windows.
He wanted to.
The gesture felt theatrical.
He walked home.

Manny was outside the bodega.
Of course.
The protagonist almost kept walking.
Manny saw him.
“Yo.”
“Yo.”
“You look like shit.”
“Thank you.”
“Girl?”
The protagonist stopped.
“Yeah.”
Manny nodded.
No joke.

They walked together.

“What happened?”
The protagonist started.
“Ana thinks—”
Stopped.
Manny looked over.
The protagonist tried again.
“We're having problems.”
“Bad?”
“I don't know.”
“Okay.”
This okay was different.
Less weapon.
More room.

Manny asked:
“You do something?”
“Yes.”
“What?”
“I don't know.”
Manny laughed.
“That’s impressive.”
The protagonist smiled.
“I mean nothing specific.”
“That's less impressive.”

They reached the stoop.
Sat.
The protagonist told him some of it.
Not all.
Ana's distrust.
Versions.
Katherine.
The way he explained things.

Manny listened.
Mostly.
Then:
“She’s right.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“About what?”
“You do that shit.”
“Very helpful.”
“You asked.”
“I didn't ask.”
“Then I'm helping for free.”

The protagonist looked toward the street.
Cars passed.
Someone upstairs dropped something heavy.
A dog barked somewhere.
Manny said:
“You know what's fucked up?”
“What?”
“You're probably better than you used to be.”
The protagonist looked over.
Manny shrugged.
“Still annoying.”
The protagonist laughed.

Manny continued.
“But maybe being better don't mean people gotta trust you faster.”
That one hurt.
Good.

The protagonist said:
“So what am I supposed to do?”
Manny looked at him.
“Nothing.”

“Everybody says that.”
“Maybe listen.”
“Fuck you.”
Manny laughed.

The protagonist spent the next week not calling Ana.
This required more discipline than he expected.
Every evening he found a reason.
Something to tell her.
A joke.
A story.
A thought.
An apology.
A better apology.
The urge to improve the apology became its own form of contact.
He resisted.
Mostly.

He wrote letters he did not mail.
Three.
The first was eight pages.
The second four.
The third one.
He read the one-page version.
Still too much.
He tore it up.

At work Bernstein noticed.
“You're useless today.”
“Thank you.”
“Girl?”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Is everybody psychic?”
“No. You're nineteen.”

The protagonist laughed.
“Everybody says that too.”
“Everybody's right sometimes.”
Bernstein handed him a file.
“Fix this.”
The protagonist took it.
Work.
Good.
Something with edges.

That afternoon Howard asked him to summarize a client meeting.
The protagonist wrote two pages.
Bernstein crossed out half.
“Too much explanation.”
The protagonist stared at the margin.
The universe had become repetitive.

After a week Ana called.
He was at home.
His mother answered first.
“Ana.”
The protagonist stood too quickly.
His mother watched him cross the room.
No comment.
Mercifully.

He picked up.
“Hey.”
“Hey.”
Silence.
He let it remain.

Ana said:
“I miss you.”

The protagonist closed his eyes.
“I miss you too.”
No speech.
Good.

“Can we talk?”
“Yes.”
“When?”
He almost said now.
Instead:
“Whenever you want.”
Ana paused.
“Tomorrow?”
“Yes.”
“Okay.”
Okay.
This one he liked.

They met the next afternoon.
Walked again.
Different street.
Same city.
Ana said:
“I don't know what we're doing.”
The protagonist nodded.
“Me neither.”
She looked at him.
No explanation followed.

“I don't want to break up.”
He felt relief.
Too large.
“I don't either.”
“But I don't want to go back to how things were.”
“Okay.”

Ana smiled slightly.
“Good.”

They kept walking.
Nothing was solved.
That was new.
No contract.
No promise.
No clean reset.
They stayed together.
Sort of.
Carefully.
With more space.
Less certainty.
The protagonist did not like uncertainty.
He was beginning to learn that dislike did not grant veto power.

That night he went home and sat in his room.
He thought about writing.
Did not.
He thought about calling Ana.
Did not.
He thought about whether this counted as growth.
Unfortunately, yes.
Then he thought about whether thinking it counted as growth ruined it.
Possibly.
Then he laughed.
Quietly.

His mother yelled from the kitchen:
“What?”
“Nothing.”
The old answer.

Still useful.
He lay back.
For once he did not need a better explanation.

Chapter 25

“The Cut”

He knew before the coach said his name.
This did not make it hurt less.
It made the previous twenty minutes worse.
They were standing along the first-base line in jackets, cleats sinking slightly into the damp grass, pretending not to count.
Everybody counted.
Twenty-seven players.
Then twenty-six.
Then twenty-five.
The coach had a clipboard.
This was unnecessary.
Everyone knew the clipboard was unnecessary.
The clipboard existed for dignity.
Mostly his.
Maybe theirs.
The protagonist stood with his arms folded.
Too casual.
He knew this too.
Beside him Marcus kept looking straight ahead.
The wind came across the field and moved the loose dirt around home plate.
Someone had left a bucket near the batting cage.
A batting glove lay beside it.
The protagonist stared at the glove because looking at the coach seemed needy.
He had spent years avoiding appearing needy.

This had produced several interesting forms of need.
“Franco.”
Not his name, technically.
The narrator is still being childish about this.
But something like it.
He looked up.
The coach motioned toward the dugout.
Not angry.
Not disappointed.
Worse.
Administrative.
“Come see me.”
Nobody looked at him.
Which meant everyone did.
He walked.
Slow enough not to look scared.
Fast enough not to look like he was trying to make an entrance.
There are humiliations with very specific walking speeds.
He had discovered one.

The coach sat on the dugout bench.
The assistant coach stood near the fence.
The protagonist hated the assistant coach for being there.
Not personally.
Structurally.
Two men meant this had been discussed.
If only the head coach had been present, the protagonist could have imagined impulse.
With two men, there had been paperwork.
“Sit down.”
He sat.
The coach put the clipboard beside him.
Good.
At least it would not testify.

“You know what this is.”
The protagonist smiled.
Small.
“I have an idea.”
The coach did not smile back.
“You've had a rough spring.”
There were several responses available.
Bad at-bats.
Small sample.
Weather.
Timing.
The ankle.
Inconsistent playing time.
The lineup.
Bad calls.
A ball caught at the wall.
A ground ball that hit the bag.
Five line drives directly at people.
He possessed an entire legal defense.
He said:
“Yeah.”
The coach leaned forward.
“We've got younger guys pushing.”
There it was.
Younger.
Not better.
Pushing.
The language of sports had been designed by people who feared nouns.
The coach continued.
“You're not hitting.”
“I know.”
“Defense has been fine.”
Fine.
Fine was a knife disguised as a napkin.

“You've worked.”
The protagonist nodded.
“I know you have.”
This was meant kindly.
It almost made things worse.
The assistant coach looked at the dirt.
The protagonist noticed and resented him for having pity.
Then resented himself for assuming pity.
Then decided he did not have enough energy for the second resentment.
Progress.
Possibly.

“We're going to go another direction.”
The sentence was so corporate that for half a second he thought of Bernstein.
Another direction.
Not yours.
He nodded.
The coach said:
“You can stay around if you want. Help. Practice. We can talk about—”
“No.”
Too fast.
The coach stopped.
The protagonist softened it.
“I'm good.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
“You don't have to decide now.”
“I just did.”
The coach looked at him.
Not annoyed.
Almost sad.
The protagonist disliked that too.

“Okay.”
There it was.
Okay.
The word that had followed him through arguments, girlfriends, friends, mistakes, and apparently athletic death.
The coach stood.
The protagonist stood.
They shook hands.
The assistant coach stepped forward and shook his hand too.
“Keep your head up.”
He almost said:
It's up.
Did not.
Instead:
“Thanks.”

He walked back toward the line.
The remaining players were still standing there.
Now twenty-four.
Maybe twenty-three.
He had stopped counting.
Marcus looked over.
The protagonist gave the smallest possible nod.
Marcus's jaw tightened.
That was it.
No hug.
No speech.
Good.
The protagonist went toward the locker room.
Behind him another name was called.
The machine continued.

His locker looked different immediately.
That was insulting.
Same shoes.

Same sweatshirt.
Same tape.
Same half-empty bottle of liniment.
Same stupid piece of gum stuck to the underside of the shelf from somebody who had used the locker before him.
But now it all belonged to someone who did not belong.
He sat.
The room was quiet except for the heating pipes.
He removed his cleats.
Slowly.
He had imagined this moment before.
Not often.
Never voluntarily.
Every athlete knows the possibility of being told he is no longer required.
Most choose to interpret that knowledge as preparation.
It is not preparation.
It is merely dread with vocabulary.

He put one cleat in the bag.
Then the other.
He folded his practice jersey.
Then unfolded it.
Why the fuck was he folding it?
He stuffed it in.
Better.
He found a baseball in the bottom of the locker.
Official league ball.
Scuffed.
Blue ink on one side.
He turned it in his hand.
He could steal it.
Nobody would care.
He wanted it.
That made him put it back.

Then he took it again.
There are moments in a man's life when principle is confused with mood.
He put it in the bag.

The door opened.
Marcus came in.
“You good?”
“Yes.”
Marcus stared.
The protagonist laughed.
“No.”
Marcus nodded.
“Yeah.”
He sat beside him.
They did not speak for a while.
Outside, the coach called another name.
Marcus looked toward the door.
The protagonist said:
“You should go.”
“Nah.”
“You're still on the team.”
“So?”
“So go.”
Marcus stayed.

The protagonist said:
“Who else?”
Marcus named two players.
The protagonist nodded.
One surprised him.
The other did not.
He immediately began evaluating the cuts.
This one couldn't hit.
That one had a bad arm.

One had been late twice.
He caught himself constructing a hierarchy beneath his own humiliation.
It was almost impressive.
Even drowning, the ego searches for someone shorter.

Marcus said:
“You think it's final?”
The protagonist looked over.
“What?”
“You could talk to him.”
“He just talked to me.”
“I mean fight it.”
“How?”
“I don't know.”
The protagonist laughed.
“What am I gonna do, present evidence?”
Marcus smiled.
“Probably.”
That almost got him.
The protagonist looked down.

“They're wrong.”
Marcus did not answer.
The protagonist waited.
“They are.”
Marcus said:
“Maybe.”
That was betrayal.
Tiny.
Immediate.
“Maybe?”
Marcus rubbed his hands together.
“You haven't hit.”
“I know that.”

“You asked.”
“I didn't ask.”
“You said they're wrong.”
“They are.”
Marcus looked at him.
“Okay.”
“Don't fucking okay me.”
Marcus laughed.
The protagonist didn't.

“I've hit balls hard.”
“I know.”
“I've had bad luck.”
“I know.”
“I've barely played two games in a row.”
“I know.”
“You can't hit if you don't play.”
“I know.”
“So?”
Marcus looked at him.
“So maybe you're right.”
The protagonist waited.
Marcus added:
“Maybe they still cut you.”
There was nothing to do with that.
Which was rude.

The protagonist stood.
Zipped the bag.
Marcus said:
“You want me to come with you?”
“No.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
This time it was true.

Mostly.

He left through the side gate.
Not the main one.
He told himself it was shorter.
It was shorter.
Also quieter.
Both things were true.
He had begun to suspect that this phrase was becoming a tic.
The narrator agrees and apologizes.

On the walk to the subway, he called nobody.
There were no cellphones, which helped.
You could be devastated in peace then.
Or abandoned.
Same technology.
Different review.
He reached the station.
Bought a token.
Went through the turnstile.
The baseball in his bag knocked against the cleats.
Once.
Again.
Once.
Again.
He could hear it with every step.
He hated it.
Did not rearrange the bag.

At home his mother knew something was wrong because he came in early.
Not because she possessed mystical maternal intuition.
Because baseball ended later.
“Why you home?”
He put the bag down.

“Got cut.”
She stopped wiping the counter.
“What?”
“Team.”
“I heard you.”
He nodded.
She looked at him.
“You okay?”
“No.”
“Okay.”
That was all.
He almost loved her violently for not saying everything happens for a reason.

His father came in thirty minutes later.
His mother told him before the protagonist could.
Of course.
The father looked toward the living room.
The protagonist was on the couch watching television without knowing what was on.
“You got cut?”
“Yeah.”
His father stood there.
Hands in pockets.
“What'd they say?”
“I'm not hitting.”
His father nodded.
The protagonist waited.
Nothing.
“What?”
His father looked at him.
“What what?”
“You got nothing?”
“You said they cut you.”
“Yes.”

“They cut you.”
“Yeah.”
His father nodded.
“That sucks.”
The protagonist stared.
That was it.
It was nearly perfect.
Which annoyed him.

Later his father asked:
“You agree?”
The protagonist looked at him.
“With what?”
“With them.”
“No.”
His father nodded.
“You hitting?”
“No.”
“That don't help.”
“Thanks.”
“You asked.”
“I didn't.”
“You looked like you asked.”
The protagonist laughed despite himself.
His father sat.
“You wanna keep playing?”
The protagonist answered too fast.
“Yes.”
His father noticed.
“Then keep playing.”
“I can't just—”
“I didn't say there.”
The protagonist stopped.

This was the first useful sentence anybody had said all day.

He immediately wanted to turn it into a life principle.
He recognized the impulse.
Did not stop it entirely.
Some habits have deep farm systems.

Ana called that night.
He almost didn't tell her.
Then did.
“Oh my God.”
“It's fine.”
“No, it's not.”
He appreciated that.
“They're stupid.”
He appreciated that more.
Then:
“Were you hitting?”
He stared at the phone.
“You too?”
Ana laughed.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No, what?”
“I have enemies everywhere.”
She laughed again.
He smiled.
For ten seconds he felt almost normal.

“What are you going to do?”
He hated the question.
“I don't know.”
“Okay.”
“Why does everybody keep saying okay?”
“Would you prefer a lecture?”
“No.”
“Then okay.”

He lay back on the bed.

Ana said:
“Are you embarrassed?”
The question went through him.
“Yes.”
No pause.
No defense.
“Yes.”
“Why?”
He thought.
Because other players knew.
Because coaches decided.
Because he had believed he was better.
Because baseball was one of the few places where he did not have to explain why he mattered.
Because for years he had trusted the body more than language.
Because the body had just lost an argument.
“I don't know.”
Ana let that stand.

He went to the batting cage the next morning.
Not because of discipline.
Because he was furious.
There is a difference.
He took too many swings.
Hands raw.
Back tight.
Forearms burning.
The first twenty were terrible.
The next twenty better.
Then good.
Then terrible again.
He kept going.

A man in the next cage watched.
Older.
Maybe thirty.
Maybe fifty.
At twenty, everybody between thirty and fifty occupies roughly the same kingdom.
The man said:
“You trying to kill the machine?”
The protagonist looked over.
“Yeah.”
“Machine ain't coach.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Good.”
The man laughed.

He hit until his hands opened.
Not badly.
Enough.
A small split beneath one finger.
He looked at it.
There was satisfaction in visible damage.
He knew this was stupid.
Continued anyway.

For the next two weeks he trained harder.
This was partly admirable.
It was also partly revenge against people who were not present.
He ran.
Lifted.
Hit.
Threw.
Took ground balls with Marcus when schedules allowed.
He became very serious.
Seriousness can resemble purpose from a distance.

Up close it is sometimes just anger wearing clean clothes.

He did not go back to watch the team.
Marcus asked twice.
The first time he said he was working.
True.
The second time he said he had plans.
Also true.
The plan was not to go.

One Saturday he went home and found Manny on the stoop.
Manny looked at the bag.
“You playing?”
“Cages.”
“Heard.”
“From who?”
“Your mother.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“Excellent.”
Manny smiled.
“She said don't make a big deal.”
“She's very bad at instructions.”

Manny moved over.
The protagonist sat.
“You okay?”
“Everybody asks me that.”
“Because you look fucked up.”
“Thank you.”
Manny shrugged.
“You get cut, you get cut.”
The protagonist looked over.
“That's your wisdom?”
“Yeah.”
“Very deep.”

“I got more.”
“Please.”
“You could also not get cut.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Fuck you.”

A few minutes passed.
Manny said:
“You know what's funny?”
“No.”
“You always said baseball was honest.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“I did not.”
“You did.”
“When?”
“Like a million times.”
“I said it was simple.”
“You said ball don't care who your father is.”
“That is different.”
“Sounded like wisdom when you said it.”
The protagonist stared toward the street.
Manny continued:
“Now ball said something you don't like.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“The ball didn't cut me.”
Manny grinned.
“There he is.”

The protagonist started laughing.
Not because Manny was right.
Maybe he was.
Maybe he wasn't.
It was simply funny hearing his own bullshit returned in another voice.

A month later, someone he knew from another program called.
They needed a player for a weekend tournament.
Nothing glamorous.
Two games Saturday.
Maybe Sunday if they advanced.
The protagonist said yes before asking where.
Queens.
He could get there.
He borrowed a car from an uncle.
Or cousin.
The narrator is uncertain which.
This family had enough men called cousin and uncle interchangeably to defeat archival certainty.

He played shortstop.
Second game, late inning, runner on second.
Fastball.
Middle in.
He turned on it.
Hard.
For half a second he knew.
Not hoped.
Knew.
Then the left fielder moved back.
Back.
Back.
Caught it against the fence.
The protagonist stopped near first.
The inning ended.
He jogged back toward the dugout.
Someone slapped his helmet.
“Good swing.”
He hated good swing.

In the field he made two plays cleanly.
One difficult.
One ordinary.
The difficult one got applause.
The ordinary one mattered more.
He knew that.
Still liked the applause.

His last at-bat came with nobody on.
He fouled off two pitches.
Took a ball.
Then another.
Two-two.
He expected a breaking ball.
Got fastball.
Late.
Foul.
Again.
Fastball.
He stayed inside it.
Single to right.
Nothing cinematic.
Not even hard.
The kind of hit that could have found a glove.
It didn't.
He stood on first.
The first baseman said:
“Nice piece.”
The protagonist nodded.
No philosophy.
He was simply on first.

They lost anyway.
By two.
He drove home tired.

Sweat dried into his shirt.
Hands sore.
Traffic bad.
Radio low.
At a red light he looked at the baseball bag on the passenger seat.
The stolen ball from the cut day was still in the side pocket.
He had forgotten it was there.
That bothered him more than if he had remembered.

At home he emptied the bag.
Cleats.
Glove.
Tape.
The ball.
He held it.
Same scuff.
Same blue ink.
No significance had accumulated on the object itself.
He had done all that work.
He placed it on the dresser.
Then changed his mind.
Put it in a drawer.
Closed it.

Months later he would tell the story of getting cut differently depending on who asked.
To one person, bad timing.
To another, politics.
To another, he wasn't hitting.
To another, it taught him something.
That last version would become increasingly attractive.
It made the pain productive.
It made humiliation retroactively useful.
It gave the coach a role in his development.

It gave the cut a purpose.
Maybe all of that became true.
Maybe some of it.
But on the night it happened, there had been no lesson.
There had been a bag.
A bench.
A coach with a clipboard.
A baseball knocking against a pair of cleats on the way home.
And a twenty-year-old who wanted very badly to still be who he had been that morning.

Chapter 26

“The Offer”

Bernstein offered him the job on a Wednesday.
Not after a triumph.
Not after a presentation.
Not after the protagonist had rescued an account, impressed a client, or performed one of those acts people later insert into biographies because employment decisions sound disappointingly ordinary without mythology.
Bernstein was eating a tuna sandwich at his desk.
The protagonist was standing in the doorway holding a folder.
“Sit.”
“I have class.”
“When?”
“Forty minutes.”
“You'll live.”
The protagonist sat.
Bernstein took another bite.
Chewed.
Looked at the folder.
Then at him.
“What are you doing after graduation?”
The protagonist had been asked this question approximately six hundred times in the previous three months.
He had developed answers by audience.
Professors received:
“I’m keeping my options open.”

Classmates:
“Probably stay in New York.”
Family:
“I’m figuring it out.”
People he wanted to impress:
“A few things.”
Manny:
“Apparently becoming president.”
The truth was:
He did not know.
“I don't know.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Good.”
“You really need another response.”
“No.”
He wiped his hands with a napkin.
“Come work here.”
The protagonist stared.
“I already work here.”
“Full-time.”
The room changed.
Not visibly.
Same desk.
Same filing cabinet.
Same ugly plant somebody watered inconsistently.
But suddenly everything had consequences.
“How full-time?”
Bernstein looked at him.
“That's not usually how full-time works.”
The protagonist smiled.
“You know what I mean.”
“I know exactly what you mean.”
Bernstein leaned back.
“Salary. Benefits. More responsibility. You'd work with me directly for a while. If you're not useless, we'd move you up.”

“How much?”
Bernstein told him.
The protagonist's face did something.
He knew because Bernstein smiled.
“That enough?”
“Yes.”
“Good.”
The number was not enormous.
He understood this.
He also understood that it was more money than he had ever been offered to do anything.
More importantly, it sounded like a number adults made.
A salary.
Not hourly.
Salary.
The word itself carried furniture.

“When do you need to know?”
“Not today.”
“Tomorrow?”
Bernstein stared at him.
“Are you negotiating for time?”
“I’m asking.”
“Two weeks.”
The protagonist nodded.
Bernstein picked up the sandwich again.
“That’s it?”
“What else do you want?”
“I don't know.”
“A ceremony?”
“No.”
“Handshake?”
The protagonist laughed.
Bernstein held out his hand anyway.
They shook.

“Think about it.”
The protagonist stood.
At the door Bernstein said:
“And don't turn thinking about it into a fucking religion.”
The protagonist looked back.
“That seems targeted.”
“It is.”

He was late to class.
Not because Bernstein had kept him.
Because he stood on the sidewalk outside the office for nine minutes doing nothing.
People moved around him.
Men in suits.
Women in sneakers carrying heels in bags.
Delivery workers.
Taxis.
A messenger on a bicycle nearly hit him and told him exactly what he thought of stationary philosophy.
The protagonist moved.

The professor was discussing something about political institutions.
The protagonist missed the first half.
Then realized he had been staring at the same paragraph in his notebook for several minutes.
He had written:
FULL TIME
Under it:
$
Under that:
?
Years of reading had brought him to this.

After class Peter asked:

“What happened?”
“What?”
“You haven't argued with anyone.”
“Fuck you.”
“There he is.”
The protagonist told him.
Peter's eyebrows went up.
“That's great.”
“Yeah.”
“You taking it?”
“I don't know.”
Peter stared.
“What else are you doing?”
The protagonist disliked the question because it was practical.
“I write.”
“You can write while employed.”
“I know.”
“You want grad school?”
“I don't know.”
“You want to keep playing?”
The protagonist looked at him.
Peter immediately regretted it.
“Sorry.”
“No, it's fine.”
He had not played organized college baseball since the cut.
He still went to cages.
Still played when somebody called.
Still carried a glove in the trunk sometimes.
Baseball had not disappeared.
It had become less official.
This was somehow harder to explain.

Peter said:
“So?”

“So what?”
“Why wouldn't you take it?”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Because maybe I don't want to wake up one day and realize I became something because it was the first thing somebody offered me.”
Peter nodded.
“That sounds like something Bernstein said.”
The protagonist stared.
“Fuck.”
Peter laughed.

He called home that night.
His mother answered.
“I got offered a full-time job.”
She made a sound he had never heard before.
Half scream.
Half prayer.
Entirely mother.
“What?”
He explained.
Salary.
Benefits.
After graduation.
Manhattan.
She asked the salary again.
He told her.
Then she yelled for his father.
Not away from the receiver.
Into it.
The protagonist held the phone away from his ear.

His father came on.
“You got a job?”
“An offer.”

“Same thing?”
“No.”
“You saying no?”
“I don't know.”
Pause.
“Why?”
The protagonist sat on the floor beside his bed.
“I’m thinking.”
His father said nothing.
The protagonist continued because silence remained intolerable.
“I don't know if it's what I want to do.”
“What do you want to do?”
“I don't know.”
“So they offering money to do something while you figure it out.”
“Yes.”
His father considered this.
“Sounds terrible.”
The protagonist laughed.

Then his father said:
“You hate it?”
“No.”
“You good at it?”
“Yes.”
“People treat you good?”
“Yeah.”
“You stealing?”
“What?”
“Company stealing?”
“No.”
“You sure?”
The protagonist laughed.
“I think.”

His father said:
“Then I don't know what the problem is.”
“I don't want to get trapped.”
“In what?”
“A life I didn't choose.”
His father went quiet.
Long enough that the protagonist wondered if the line had dropped.
“Dad?”
“I’m here.”
Then:
“You think I chose every piece of mine?”
The protagonist said nothing.
His father continued:
“That's not how shit works.”
There was no sadness in it.
No accusation.
Which made it heavier.

The protagonist almost asked if his father regretted his life.
He didn't.
Some questions are not brave simply because they are intimate.
Sometimes they're selfish.
He was learning this slowly.

His mother returned to the phone.
“You're taking it, right?”
“I haven't decided.”
“What's to decide?”
He laughed.
“Apparently nothing.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Take the job.”

“Okay.”
“You're taking it?”
“I said okay.”
“That don't mean yes.”
He smiled.
“Where do you think I learned that?”
She laughed.
“Don't start.”

Ana came to campus that weekend.
They had been better.
Not fixed.
Better.
There were fewer calls now.
Less reporting.
Less accounting.
The reduction in contact had made some conversations warmer and others stranger.
She arrived Saturday afternoon carrying a small overnight bag.
The protagonist met her near the station.
They kissed.
Long enough to be familiar.
Short enough to notice.

“You look tired.”
“Thank you.”
“That's not an insult.”
“It never is when people say it.”
She smiled.
They walked.
He told her about the job.
Ana stopped.
“Wait. Full-time?”
“Yeah.”

“After graduation?”
“Yeah.”
She hugged him.
Immediate.
No hesitation.
“That's amazing.”
He held her.
“Yeah.”
When they separated, she asked:
“You excited?”
The protagonist paused.
“That pause was very you.”
“Fuck you.”
She smiled.

They walked across campus.
He showed her a building she had already seen twice.
This irritated her.
“I know.”
“No, this side is different.”
“I’ve been on this side.”
“You have?”
“Yes.”
“When?”
“Last time.”
He looked at the building.
“Oh.”
Ana smiled.
“You don't remember everything.”
“Apparently.”
“Good.”

That evening there was a party.
He did not want to go.
Ana did.

This surprised him.
“Since when do you want to go to my parties?”
“Since you don't.”
“That feels vindictive.”
“It is.”
They went.

The party was in a house off campus.
Too many people.
Warm rooms.
Condensation on windows.
Beer in a bathtub.
Music too loud for conversation but apparently not loud enough to prevent everyone from trying.
The protagonist knew half the room.
Ana knew nobody.
He watched himself change.
Not dramatically.
A greeting here.
A handshake there.
Different cadence.
Different jokes.
A professor imitation Ana had never heard.
A story about work.
Someone called him by a nickname she did not know.
Another person slapped his shoulder and said:
“California!”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
Ana looked at him.
“California?”
“Long story.”
She laughed.
“I’m sure.”
The person disappeared.
No interrogation.

Worse.

Later Ana watched him tell a story to four people.
He was good.
He knew he was good.
Timing.
Voices.
Details.
He watched them listening.
He made a woman laugh hard enough to bend forward.
The protagonist felt something in himself brighten.
Ana saw it too.
He knew because when the story ended she was looking at him.
Not jealous.
Not angry.
Curious.

Outside, later, she said:
“You like it here.”
He lit a cigarette someone had given him.
He did not smoke regularly.
This was another sentence people use when describing themselves before smoking.
“Sometimes.”
“You really like it here.”
He looked at her.
“Is that bad?”
“No.”
“You sound like it's bad.”
“I didn't say that.”
The protagonist exhaled smoke.
Immediately disliked the taste.
Kept smoking.
Ana said:

“You're different here.”
He felt the old argument approaching.
“I’m not—”
Then stopped.
Ana noticed.
“I didn't say fake.”
He looked at her.
“I know.”
This time correctly.

She leaned against the railing.
“You're louder.”
“I’m loud everywhere.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“Not with your parents.”
“That’s because my mother is louder.”
Ana smiled.
“Not with me either.”
The protagonist looked toward the window.
Inside, people moved behind fogged glass.
He could hear the music through the wall.
“What am I with you?”
Ana thought.
“More tired.”
He laughed.
“That’s romantic.”
“I mean less on.”
There it was again.
The phrase from months before.
He had hoped it had expired.

Ana said:
“I think you like being impressive.”
“Everybody likes being impressive.”

“Probably.”
He hated when people agreed with his defenses.
It left them standing.

“You don't think I'm impressive?”
Ana looked at him.
He was joking.
Mostly.
“I do.”
“Good.”
She stepped closer.
“That’s why it's annoying.”
He laughed.
Then she kissed him.
The cigarette burned between his fingers until he cursed and dropped it.
Ana laughed into his shoulder.
For several seconds there was no problem.

They left before midnight.
Back in his room, they undressed each other without ceremony.
No literary significance should be attached to this.
They were young, had privacy, loved each other, and wanted to have sex.
Civilizations have survived on less explanation.
Afterward they lay under a blanket.
Ana's head on his chest.
The protagonist stared at the ceiling.
She said:
“You're thinking.”
“No.”
“I can hear it.”
“How?”
“Your whole body gets annoying.”

He laughed.

After a while:
“If I take the job, I'm staying in New York.”
Ana did not move.
“I assumed.”
“You staying?”
She lifted her head.
“What?”
“New York.”
“I don't know.”
He felt something tighten.
“What do you mean?”
“I've been thinking about graduate programs.”
“Where?”
“A few places.”
“Where?”
She named them.
One was in New York.
Two weren't.
The protagonist sat slightly higher.
“When were you going to tell me?”
Ana rolled onto her back.
“I’m telling you.”
“You've applied?”
“No.”
“You're going to?”
“Maybe.”
“When did this start?”
She looked at him.
“Why does it matter when it started?”
“Because we're together.”
“I know.”
“Then shouldn't I know?”
“You know now.”

He could feel himself getting angry.
Not explosive.
Accounting anger.
Dates.
Sequence.
Information withheld.
His specialty.
The irony was visible from space.
He missed it for almost thirty seconds.

“You're seriously thinking about leaving?”
Ana sat up.
“I’m seriously thinking about what I want to do.”
“And that might mean leaving.”
“Yes.”
“What about us?”
Ana looked at him.
“What about us?”
He stared.
“That’s fucked up.”
Her face changed.
“Why?”
“Because you're talking like we're some detail.”
“I’m not.”
“Sounds like it.”
Ana reached for her shirt.
The protagonist knew this movement.
Conversation had changed rooms.

“Ana.”
She put the shirt on.
“Ana.”
“What?”
“I’m not saying you can't go.”
“Thank you.”

“Don't do that.”
“Do what?”
“Make it sound like I'm giving you permission.”
She stared at him.
“You are the one who said you weren't saying I couldn't go.”
He stopped.
That was irritatingly accurate.

He sat at the edge of the bed.
“I'm asking whether I'm part of the decision.”
Ana looked at him.
“Are you making your job decision based on me?”
“Yes.”
The word came quickly.
Too quickly.
Ana heard it.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“If I said I wanted you to turn it down?”
The protagonist hesitated.
There.
Tiny.
Fatal.
Ana nodded.
“Okay.”
“That's not fair.”
“I didn't say anything.”
“You don't have to.”
He stood.
“It's a good job.”
“I know.”
“I worked for it.”
“I know.”
“I like it.”
“I know.”

“So obviously that matters.”
“I know.”
He stopped.
Ana sat on the chair.

After a moment she said:
“That's what I'm saying.”
“What?”
“You get to want things.”
“I never said you don't.”
“I know.”
The word again.
But quieter.

The protagonist sat on the bed.
For a while neither spoke.
Then:
“If you go away, what happens?”
Ana looked at the floor.
“I don't know.”
“You keep saying that.”
“So do you.”
He smiled despite himself.
“Fair.”

She stayed.
That mattered.
They did not resolve it.
That mattered too.
Around three in the morning Ana fell asleep.
The protagonist didn't.
He looked at her.
At the small bag on the floor.
At her shoes beside his desk.
At the books stacked near the wall.

At the jacket Peter had lent him years before and never asked to have returned.
He had bought his own jacket since.
Peter's still hung there.
The protagonist had never noticed.

He got out of bed.
Went into the hallway.
Called home.
No answer.
Of course.
Three-thirty in the morning.
He hung up before the machine could pick up.
Then laughed quietly at himself.
Who the fuck was he calling?
His father?
His mother?
For what?
Permission?

He went downstairs.
Outside.
Cold.
Campus nearly empty.
Somebody laughing far away.
A bottle breaking.
A car passing.
He walked without destination.
There are moments young people later call crossroads.
At the time they mostly feel like insomnia.

He thought about the job.
Ana.
New York.
Writing.

Baseball.
Money.
His parents.
Manny.
College ending.
Every choice seemed to contain a betrayal.
Take the job: betray possibility.
Reject it: betray opportunity.
Stay with Ana: maybe ask her to shrink.
Let her go: maybe call cowardice generosity.
Stay in New York: become predictable.
Leave: become somebody who left.
He had enough intellectual equipment to make any decision look morally suspicious.
This was becoming a problem.

Near the library he sat on a low wall.
A maintenance worker pushed a cart past him.
Older man.
Blue uniform.
The protagonist nodded.
The man nodded back.
No wisdom was exchanged.
This deserves mention because novels are otherwise full of suspiciously philosophical maintenance workers.
The man had work to do.
He kept going.

The protagonist remained.
He tried to imagine himself at twenty-five.
Impossible.
Twenty-five sounded ancient.
A fully formed adult.
Someone who owned matching towels.
Someone who knew whether to take the job.

Someone who had finished becoming himself.
The protagonist believed many stupid things at twenty-one.
This one will become important.

Ana found him asleep on top of the blanket at seven.
He had returned sometime before dawn.
She shook his shoulder.
“You okay?”
He opened his eyes.
“Yeah.”
“You left.”
“I walked.”
“Why?”
“I don't know.”
She smiled.
“That bad?”
“What?”
“Not knowing.”
He looked at her.
“Yes.”
She kissed his forehead.
“Good.”
He laughed.
“Everybody has become Bernstein.”
“Who?”
“Exactly.”

They ate breakfast at a diner.
Ana ordered eggs.
The protagonist coffee and toast.
She looked terrible.
He told her.
She kicked him under the table.
He loved her.
That was clear.

Whether clarity helped was another matter.

Before she left, they stood near the train.
Ana said:
“If I apply somewhere outside New York, I'll tell you.”
“Okay.”
“And if I get in, we'll figure it out.”
He nodded.
“We'll figure it out.”
Neither believed this completely.
That did not make it a lie.

On Monday the protagonist went to work.
Bernstein was on the phone.
The protagonist waited at the door.
Bernstein held up one finger.
Finished the call.
“What?”
“I’m taking it.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Good.”
“That’s all?”
“What do you want?”
“I don't know.”
Bernstein stared.
The protagonist smiled.
“Right.”

Bernstein pulled a file toward him.
“Then start learning this account.”
The protagonist took it.
No champagne.
No announcement.
No music.

He had just selected a future and somebody handed him paperwork.
This seemed unfairly realistic.

That evening he called his parents.
His mother celebrated enough for several departments.
His father said:
“Good.”
Then:
“You happy?”
The protagonist paused.
“Yes.”
It was true.
His father said:
“Good.”

He called Ana last.
“I took it.”
“I figured you would.”
“Are you mad?”
“No.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
He waited.
Ana said:
“I’m proud of you.”
He closed his eyes.
“Thank you.”
And because he had not yet become completely unbearable:
“I'm scared too.”
Ana was quiet.
“Me too.”

Months later, when graduation actually arrived, photographs would make the period look settled.

Caps.
Gowns.
Parents smiling.
Arms around shoulders.
The protagonist in the middle of people who loved him.
A photograph is excellent at proving everyone stood together for one one-hundred-and-twenty-fifth of a second.
It reports less reliably on anything surrounding it.
But that Wednesday, before any photograph existed, he was simply twenty-one years old, commuting downtown with a new employee packet folded inside his bag.
On the train he saw his reflection in the window.
Tie.
Coat.
Tired face.
For a moment he looked like the kind of man he used to invent.
The thought pleased him.
Then frightened him.
Then the train went underground, and the window gave him back only himself.

Chapter 27

“No Ceremony”

His mother cried before the ceremony started.
This irritated him.
Not because she was crying.
Because nothing had happened yet.
They were standing outside the auditorium with several hundred families who had all apparently received the same instructions about where to stand while receiving no useful information about where anything actually was.
His mother held the program.
His father held the camera.
The protagonist wore the cap incorrectly.
Peter's mother had already fixed it once.
It had returned to its natural state.
His mother looked at him and began crying.
“Ma.”
“What?”
“Nothing happened.”
“You're graduating.”
“Not yet.”
She wiped beneath one eye.
“So?”
He laughed.
His father looked through the camera.
“Move.”
“What?”
“You're blocking the light.”

The protagonist stepped left.
“More.”
He stepped again.
His father took a photograph.
The protagonist blinked.
“Do another.”
“I did.”
“My eyes were closed.”
“How you know?”
“I blinked.”
His father lowered the camera.
“You'll survive.”
This photograph would later become one of his mother's favorites.
His eyes were closed.

Ana arrived ten minutes before they were supposed to enter.
The protagonist had been looking for her without admitting he was looking for her.
She came through the crowd wearing a dark dress he had never seen.
For half a second he simply watched her walk toward him.
Then his mother saw her.
“Ana!”
His mother hugged her.
Ana laughed.
His father kissed her cheek.
The protagonist waited.
This bothered him.
He had known her longest.
Possibly.
History was already becoming competitive.
When Ana finally reached him she smiled.
“Graduate.”
“Not yet.”

She looked at his mother.
“She's crying already?”
“Completely premature.”
Ana kissed him.
“Congratulations.”
“Thank you.”
The kiss was gentle.
Too gentle?
No.
Maybe.
He put the thought away.
Almost.

Ana had been accepted to a graduate program outside New York.
Not one of the farthest ones.
Far enough.
They had known for six weeks.
Neither had found the correct way to discuss it.
This was partly because there was no correct way.
The protagonist kept trying to invent one.
They had agreed to try.
Try what remained unclear.
Calls.
Visits.
Faithfulness.
Patience.
Schedules.
The word try is unusually efficient.
It permits two people to agree while protecting both from the details.

Manny came too.
Late.
Of course.

The protagonist saw him moving through the crowd as everyone began filing inside.
Manny pointed to the cap.
“Beautiful.”
“Fuck you.”
“You look like a black mushroom.”
The protagonist laughed.
His mother turned.
“Manny!”
Another hug.
Manny endured it.
His father shook his hand.
“Good to see you.”
“You too.”
Manny looked at the protagonist.
“Your whole family's graduating?”
“Apparently.”

Inside, the protagonist sat among students whose last names had placed them near him.
Not necessarily friends.
This offended several modern theories about the significance of graduation seating.
Peter was somewhere three sections away.
Marcus farther back.
The protagonist looked toward the audience.
Couldn't find his family.
Then found Manny first.
Naturally.
Manny was waving.
Not subtly.
The protagonist shook his head.
Manny waved harder.
Someone beside the protagonist said:
“Friend of yours?”

“No.”
The student laughed.
Manny somehow saw this and gave him the finger.
The protagonist smiled.

Speeches happened.
Important people said important things.
The future.
Responsibility.
Community.
Excellence.
Service.
Possibility.
The protagonist listened for several minutes.
Then stopped.
Not cynically.
There were simply too many futures being distributed at once.
Thousands of parents had traveled to watch their children enter adulthood.
Nobody had informed adulthood.

The president of the college said something about using education to make a difference.
The protagonist liked the sentence.
Then distrusted himself for liking it.
Then became annoyed that he could no longer experience a sentence without immediately cross-examining the experience.
He adjusted the cap.
It slipped again.
The woman beside him fixed it.
“Leave it.”
“Thank you.”
“You've been fighting it for an hour.”

“I have a difficult head.”
“I believe that.”

Names were called.
Rows stood.
Sat.
Moved.
Waited.
This took a long time.
Meaning often does.

His name approached.
The protagonist felt his body change.
Not nerves exactly.
Awareness.
He would stand.
Walk.
Shake a hand.
Receive something that might not even be the diploma yet.
Return to his seat.
That was all.
The simplicity of the procedure annoyed him.
He had expected some physical sensation.
A border.
A click.
Something.

His name was called.
He walked.
His mother screamed.
Not cheered.
Screamed.
People laughed.
The protagonist laughed too.
He could hear Manny yelling something incomprehensible.

His father attempted a photograph.
Ana clapped.
He shook the president's hand.
Received the folder.
For one strange second he wanted to stop.
Turn.
Look at everybody.
He did not.
There were people behind him.
He kept walking.

By the time he returned to his chair he was a college graduate.
Apparently.
Nothing in his body had updated.
He checked.
Same knees.
Same hands.
Same unreasonable concern with being observed.

Outside afterward, everyone wanted photographs.
His parents.
Ana.
Peter.
Marcus.
Manny.
Professors.
People he barely knew.
The protagonist smiled until his face hurt.
His father kept giving instructions.
“Closer.”
“To who?”
“Everybody.”
“We can't all get closer.”
“Just move.”

They moved.

There was one picture with the protagonist between his parents.
His mother held his arm.
His father's hand rested on his shoulder.
The protagonist remembered being nine.
Not vividly.
Just the strange fact of having once been nine.
His parents had seemed finished then.
Complete.
Adults.
Now he could see his father's hair thinning.
His mother's hands looked older than he remembered.
This seemed like information someone should have given him.

His father said quietly:
“Proud of you.”
The protagonist looked at him.
No joke.
No newspaper.
No practical question.
Just that.
The protagonist said:
“Thanks.”
He wanted to say more.
Nothing came that would improve it.
Good.

His mother hugged him.
“You did it.”
“We did it.”
The phrase came automatically.
She pulled back.

“No. You did.”
He almost argued.
Tuition.
Train money.
Food.
Years.
Everything.
Then realized she did not require a theory of collective achievement.
She was telling her son something.
He let her.

Later there was a small gathering at a restaurant near campus.
Nothing elegant.
Tables pushed together.
Too many chairs.
Pitchers of soda and beer.
Bread arriving constantly.
The protagonist sat between Ana and Manny.
This was unsafe.

Peter raised a glass.
“To being unemployed.”
Several people laughed.
The protagonist raised his own.
“Some of us are employed.”
Peter pointed.
“Class traitor.”
Manny said:
“He got that job through connections.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“I'm going to kill you.”
Ana laughed.
Peter said:

“Actually, my father—”
“Peter.”
“What?”
“Don't.”
Peter smiled.
Manny looked delighted.
“I knew it.”
Everybody laughed.
The protagonist did too.
Mostly.

Marcus arrived late.
He had driven home that morning for something and returned.
They hugged.
“How you doing?”
“Good.”
“You?”
“Good.”
This was not enough, but neither knew what else to put there.
Marcus had transferred after the previous year.
Family money.
Work.
Baseball.
Several reasons.
The protagonist had seen him only twice since.
They still called.
Less.
Nobody had betrayed anybody.
Life had simply become better at scheduling them apart.

Marcus sat.
Manny asked him:
“You the baseball guy?”

Marcus looked at the protagonist.
“The baseball guy?”
“He talks about you like you were Mickey Mantle.”
The protagonist said:
“I have never done that.”
Marcus smiled.
“He probably made half of it up.”
Manny slapped the table.
“Finally.”
Ana laughed.
The protagonist looked around.
This was unfair.
Different witnesses to different versions of him had begun sharing notes.

Manny asked Marcus about the cut.
The protagonist immediately objected.
“We're not doing this.”
Marcus ignored him.
“He wasn't hitting.”
“Traitor.”
Manny nodded.
“So everybody agrees.”
“I hate all of you.”
Ana touched his knee beneath the table.
He looked at her.
She smiled.
For a moment the room softened.

Later, when people began leaving, Ana asked him to walk.
They went outside.
Warm evening.
End of spring.
Cars moving slowly.
Families carrying flowers and folders.

Graduates still wearing gowns because nobody knew when one was supposed to take them off.

Ana said:
“You happy?”
“Yes.”
He meant it.
“You?”
“Yeah.”
They walked.
After a while she said:
“I leave in August.”
He knew.
Still hurt.
“Yeah.”
“I don't want the whole summer to be about that.”
“Okay.”
“I mean it.”
“I know.”
She looked at him.
He smiled.
“Sorry. Reflex.”
She smiled back.

They reached a bench.
Sat.
Ana took off her shoes.
The protagonist looked at her feet.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You're staring.”
“You have graduation feet.”
“What the fuck does that mean?”
“I don't know.”
She laughed.

Good.

Ana leaned against him.
“Do you think we'll make it?”
There it was.
The question they had both been circling.
The protagonist looked across the street.
A father was trying to fit balloons into a car.
One escaped.
Everybody nearby watched it rise.
The father said something that made his family laugh.
The balloon continued upward.
The protagonist knew better than to make this symbolic.
Barely.

“I don't know.”
Ana nodded.
No disappointment.
That surprised him.
Then she said:
“Me neither.”
They sat.

The protagonist said:
“I want to.”
“I know.”
“You want to?”
“Yes.”
He nodded.
That was all.
No contract.
No promise to call every night.
No declaration that distance could not defeat them.
They had become slightly less ambitious in their lying.

Ana said:
“What if we don't?”
He felt the old panic.
Smaller now.
Still there.
“I don't know.”
She looked at him.
“You're getting good at that.”
“No I'm not.”
She laughed.

He looked at her.
“What if you meet someone?”
Ana raised an eyebrow.
“What if you do?”
“I asked first.”
“That isn't how adulthood works.”
“I'm not convinced this is adulthood.”
“Fair.”
He looked down.
“You didn't answer.”
“Neither did you.”
There it was.
A draw.
He hated draws less than he used to.

That summer went too quickly.
This is not a montage.
The narrator refuses.
Things happened.
Ordinary things.
The protagonist started full-time at Bernstein's firm.
He woke earlier.
Bought two more shirts.
Learned which subway car put him closest to the office exit.

His father asked him for help reading something from the bank.
His mother began speaking about his salary to relatives as though she had negotiated it personally.
Manny worked his better-paying job and complained that the résumé had made him employable against his will.
Ana prepared to leave.
That last fact sat beneath everything.

One Friday night they went downtown.
No grand farewell.
Just out.
Manny joined at first, then disappeared with people he knew.
The protagonist and Ana ended up alone.
They danced.
Poorly.
Maybe well.
Nobody kept score.
A freestyle song came on.
The protagonist knew every word.
Ana laughed.
“You said you hate this.”
“I never said that.”
“You absolutely said that.”
“When?”
“High school.”
“I was young.”
“You are twenty-one.”
“Exactly.”
She laughed.
He sang louder.
No identity crisis.
No sociological meaning.
He liked the fucking song.
Sometimes evidence ends there.

Outside after two, Ana said she was tired.
They took the train uptown.
Sat close.
No phones.
No photographs.
No record.
Just two people in a nearly empty subway car trying not to think about August.

Ana left on a Tuesday morning.
The protagonist went with her family to the station.
Not airport.
Train.
This seemed less dramatic.
He appreciated that until it happened.
Her bags were too heavy.
He carried one.
Her father carried another.
Her mother kept checking the tickets.
Everyone stayed practical.
Practicality is one of the disguises fear wears in families.

At the platform Ana's mother hugged him.
Her father shook his hand and then, unexpectedly, hugged him too.
The protagonist looked at Ana.
She looked scared.
Good.
He had been afraid he was the only one.

They stood near the train.
The announcement came.
Boarding.
People moved.

Ana said:
“Call me tonight.”
“I will.”
“Not at three in the morning.”
“I know.”
She smiled.
“That's allowed.”
He laughed.

They kissed.
Longer this time.
Nobody pretended not to watch.
When they separated, Ana touched his face.
“Don't become unbearable.”
“Too late.”
“True.”
He smiled.
Then she boarded.

The protagonist stood with her parents until the train moved.
Ana appeared at a window.
Waved.
He waved.
Then the train left.
No music.
No speech.
No sudden understanding.
Just steel moving down a track.

Her mother began crying.
Her father put an arm around her.
The protagonist looked away.
Not because their grief embarrassed him.
Because it belonged to them.

He was getting better at recognizing borders.
Not consistently.
Enough to notice one.

On the subway home he sat alone.
He thought about calling Manny when he got in.
Thought about going to work early.
Thought about writing Ana a letter before she even arrived.
Thought about everything that might happen.
Then stopped.
The train moved.

He was twenty-one.
A college graduate.
Employed.
In love.
Possibly losing the person he loved.
No longer a college baseball player.
Still playing sometimes.
Still writing.
Less often.
Still reading.
Constantly.
Still changing his voice depending on the room.
Still pretending not to.
Still capable of kindness.
Still capable of being an asshole.
Still convinced he was becoming someone.
This was true.
The mistake was thinking the process had a destination.

That night his father was watching television.
His mother asked:
“She leave?”
“Yeah.”

“You okay?”
“Yeah.”
She looked at him.
He sighed.
“No.”
“Okay.”
He sat beside his father.
His mother went back to the kitchen.
His father kept watching television.
After a while he said:
“You working tomorrow?”
“Yes.”
“What time?”
“Nine.”
“You gotta get up.”
“I know.”
His father nodded.
No philosophy.

The protagonist sat there another twenty minutes.
Then stood.
“I'm going to bed.”
His father said:
“Good night.”
“Night.”
He walked toward his room.
His mother called from the kitchen:
“You want something to eat?”
“No.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
“You didn't eat.”
“I ate.”
“When?”
“Earlier.”

“What?”
He stopped in the hallway.
For one second he was nine again.
Seventeen.
Twenty.
Every age remained somewhere in the house.
“Pizza.”
“With Ana?”
“Yeah.”
His mother nodded from the kitchen.
“Okay.”
He went to his room.

On the desk was his graduation program.
His mother had put it there.
Across the front:
COMMENCEMENT.
A beginning.
He stared at the word.
Then laughed.
Of course they would call the ending a beginning.
Human beings could not resist improving transitions.
He opened the drawer looking for a pen.
The baseball from the day he was cut rolled forward.
He had forgotten it again.
He picked it up.
Held it.
Then placed it back.
Beside it was Elizabeth's old phone number.
He had never called.
The paper was folded.
Faded slightly.
Another person he might have known.
Another life that failed to occur.
He closed the drawer.

The next morning the alarm went off.
He got dressed.
Tie.
Shirt.
Shoes.
His mother was already awake.
His father too.
Nobody mentioned graduation.
Nobody mentioned Ana.
His mother handed him coffee.
His father said:
“Train's gonna be crowded.”
The protagonist looked at the clock.
“Shit.”
He grabbed his bag.
Ran outside.

He made the train.
Barely.
The doors closed behind him.
He stood among commuters.
Nobody knew he had graduated.
Nobody knew his girlfriend had left.
Nobody knew he'd once been cut from a baseball team or claimed to be from California or spent his adolescence writing sentences he hoped might explain him.
Good.
The train moved toward Manhattan.
At the next stop more people got on.
He moved deeper into the car to make room.
And without ceremony, the rest of his life began.

Chapter 28

“Twenty-Five”

On the morning he turned twenty-five, the protagonist was standing in his underwear trying to decide whether a shirt smelled bad enough to require washing.
This was adulthood.
He held the shirt beneath his nose.
Once.
Again.
Turned it around.
A third inspection near the collar produced unfavorable findings.
He put it on anyway.
Not because it smelled good.
Because the competing shirt needed ironing.
Twenty-five.
Fully formed.

The apartment was small.
Not terribly small.
New York small, which permitted tenants to describe structural deficiencies as geography.
One bedroom.
Kitchen that required negotiation between refrigerator and stove.
Bathroom window facing brick.
He could afford it.
Mostly.

That mattered.
There were books everywhere.
Not arranged beautifully.
Stacked.
Desk.
Floor.
Windowsill.
Two beside the toilet.
One beneath a table leg because the table rocked and civilization had finally found a practical use for political philosophy.
He had acquired furniture without remembering acquiring furniture.
A lamp from his parents.
Desk from somebody at work.
Chair from Peter.
Bookshelves bought unfinished and never finished.
The apartment looked temporary.
He had lived there almost two years.

The alarm clock said 7:18.
He was late.
Not seriously.
Enough.
He found his keys.
Lost them.
Found them again beneath yesterday's newspaper.
Picked up the newspaper.
Read half a headline.
Put it down.
Found a notebook underneath.
Opened it.
That was the mistake.

The handwriting was his.

Older.
Maybe seventeen.
He had brought the notebooks when he moved because throwing them away seemed dishonest and reading them seemed unbearable.
This particular page said:
PEOPLE WANT CERTAINTY MORE THAN TRUTH.
He stared.
Twenty-five-year-old him considered seventeen-year-old him a fucking asshole.
Then:
Maybe.
He closed the notebook.
Progress remained difficult to measure.

The phone rang.
He looked at the clock.
Ignored it.
It rang again.
He picked up.
“Hello?”
His mother.
“Happy birthday.”
“Thank you.”
“You're awake?”
“Yes.”
“You sound asleep.”
“I’m awake.”
“What time you going to work?”
“Soon.”
“What time is soon?”
“Ma.”
“I’m asking.”
“Eight.”
“It’s after seven.”

“I know.”
“You eat?”
“Yes.”
He had not.
“What?”
“Food.”
“What food?”
He smiled.
“Why does this always become testimony?”
“Because you lie.”
There it was.
Twenty-five years of motherhood reduced efficiently.

“I’ll eat.”
“That's not what I asked.”
“I know.”
“Your father wants to talk.”
He heard the phone move.
His father came on.
“Happy birthday.”
“Thanks.”
“Twenty-five.”
“Apparently.”
“You old.”
“You're my father.”
“Exactly.”
The protagonist laughed.

His father said:
“You coming Sunday?”
“Yes.”
“Your mother cooking.”
“I figured.”
“She invited everybody.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.

“Everybody who?”
“Everybody.”
“That’s not a number.”
“You know your mother.”
He did.

His father said:
“You need anything?”
“No.”
The answer arrived automatically.
He noticed.
His father did too.
“Okay.”
Pause.
Then:
“You sure?”
The protagonist looked around the apartment.
Bills on desk.
Refrigerator making an expensive-sounding noise.
Car needing something.
Rent due next week.
He was fine.
Actually fine.
“Yeah.”
“Okay.”
This okay was simply okay.
They had both improved.
Or grown tired.
Sometimes these look similar.

On the subway downtown he stood because there were no seats.
The car smelled of coats, coffee, metal, perfume, newspaper ink, and somebody's breakfast.
A Walkman leaked music nearby.

Across from him a teenager wore headphones and sneakers the protagonist would have considered ridiculous four years earlier.
He now considered them ridiculous differently.
This is one of aging's earliest pleasures.

A man beside him folded the newspaper inward to read without striking anyone.
The protagonist glanced at the date.

There it was.
No trumpet.

At twenty-five he had expected to possess something called perspective.
He had perspective.
Too much, sometimes.
He could explain why people behaved badly.
Why institutions failed.
Why families repeated themselves.
Why relationships became negotiations.
Why markets rewarded some things and ignored others.
Why people believed what they needed to believe.
Why he believed what he needed to believe.
He could explain nearly everything.
The problem remained approximately the same.
Knowing why a man is stepping on your foot does not remove the foot.

At work Bernstein was arguing with someone on the telephone.
The protagonist passed his office.
Bernstein held up one finger.
The protagonist stopped.
Bernstein continued:

“No. No. That's not what we agreed.”
Pause.
“No.”
Pause.
“You can explain it however you want. That's not what we agreed.”
The protagonist smiled.
Some sentences survived decades because human beings kept earning them.
Bernstein hung up.
“Happy birthday.”
The protagonist stared.
“How do you know?”
“Payroll.”
“That's depressing.”
“Twenty-five?”
“Yes.”
Bernstein looked him over.
“You look thirty.”
“Thank you.”
“Not a compliment.”

Bernstein handed him a file.
“Meeting at ten.”
“I know.”
“You ready?”
“Yes.”
“Good.”
The protagonist started to leave.
Bernstein said:
“You doing anything?”
“For what?”
“Your birthday.”
“My mother is feeding half the city Sunday.”
“Good.”

“You?”
“What about me?”
“When's your birthday?”
Bernstein looked offended.
“None of your business.”
The protagonist laughed.

His desk had changed.
Not the physical desk.
What accumulated on it.
Client files.
Notes.
A calendar.
Telephone numbers.
People called asking for him now.
Not Bernstein.
Him.
This still pleased him.
He pretended it didn't.

At ten he sat across from three men representing a company considering expansion.
Four years earlier he would have watched Bernstein.
Now Bernstein mostly watched him.
The protagonist asked questions.
Revenue.
Locations.
Payroll.
Debt.
Customers.
The men answered.
One did most of the talking.
Another corrected him.
The third said almost nothing.
The protagonist noticed.

He had become good at noticing who didn't speak.
This was useful.
It was also dangerous because he occasionally mistook observation for knowledge.

The quiet man finally said:
“You're assuming the second location cannibalizes the first.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Yes.”
“Why?”
He started answering.
Stopped.
Looked at the numbers.
“Because that's what happened last time.”
“Different neighborhood.”
“Yes.”
“Different customer.”
“Maybe.”
The man waited.
The protagonist looked again.
He had built the whole analysis around the assumption.
A good assumption.
Defensible.
Possibly wrong.
Four years earlier he might have defended it another five minutes simply because he had already begun.
Instead:
“You're right.”
Bernstein looked over.
The quiet man said:
“I'm not saying I'm right.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Right.”
Everyone laughed.
Small.

Useful.
The meeting continued.

Afterward Bernstein said:
“You handled that well.”
“Which part?”
“Being wrong.”
“I wasn't wrong.”
Bernstein stared.
The protagonist smiled.
“Possibly wrong.”
“Jesus Christ.”

At lunch he walked alone.
Bought a slice.
Folded it.
Ate standing near the counter because all the seats were taken.
Twenty-five.
Salary.
Apartment.
Clients.
Pizza standing up.
The universe maintained balance.

A woman near the register looked familiar.
He watched her.
Not obviously.
Probably obviously.
Dark hair.
Red coat.
Maybe thirty.
Maybe twenty-six.
She looked at him.
Recognition moved across her face.

“Wait.”
He smiled.
Danger.
“You're—”
She said a name.
His name.
The one the narrator continues withholding.
“Yes.”
She laughed.
“Oh my God.”
He knew he should know her.
Nothing.
“Hi.”
She hugged him.
He hugged back.
Still nothing.

“You don't remember me.”
There are questions for which honesty and survival briefly become enemies.
“Of course I remember you.”
Her face changed.
Not convinced.
“From?”
Fuck.
He smiled.
“Give me a second.”
She laughed.
“You don't.”
“No, I do.”
“Where?”
He searched.
College?
Club?
High school?

Work?
Friend of Ana?
Washington Heights?
Bronx?
California, God forbid?

She said:
“Roxy.”
Something opened.
Not enough.
Then:
“Denise's birthday.”
There.
A basement first.
Then a train.
Then a club.
Then her.
“Marisol.”
She pointed at him.
“There.”
He laughed.
“See?”
“You were dying.”
“I had it.”
“You absolutely did not.”
They laughed.

Marisol looked him over.
“You look exactly the same.”
This was false.
He appreciated it.
“You too.”
Also false.
Civilization continued.

“What are you doing?”
“Work.”
She looked at the shirt and tie.
“No shit.”
“You?”
“I'm working nearby.”
They exchanged the usual compressed biographies.
Job.
Neighborhood.
People.
She was married.
One child.
The protagonist felt shocked.
Not because twenty-five-year-olds could have children.
Because people from his past had apparently continued existing without permission.

“You still writing?”
He paused.
“Sometimes.”
“You used to write everything down.”
He smiled.
“Unfortunately.”
“You told me once you were going to write a book.”
“I probably told everybody that.”
“No.”
She shook her head.
“You were serious.”
He looked at her.
“I was serious about everything.”
She laughed.
“No. You acted serious about everything.”
Different sentence.
He felt it.

Marisol checked the time.
“I gotta go.”
They exchanged numbers.
Home numbers.
Work numbers.
The logistical intimacy of 1992.
She hugged him again.
“Happy birthday.”
He stared.
“How the hell do you know?”
“You told me once.”
“When?”
“Years ago.”
She left.
The protagonist stood holding the small piece of paper.

He had no memory of telling her his birthday.
She remembered.
He didn't remember her until prompted.
This seemed unfair.
Memory should at least embarrass everyone equally.

Back at work the phone rang.
Manny.
“Old man.”
“How does everybody know?”
“Your mother.”
“Of course.”
“What you doing tonight?”
“Nothing.”
“Good. We're going out.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“I got work tomorrow.”
“So does everybody.”

“Where?”
“Don't worry.”
“I hate when you say that.”
“Seven-thirty.”
“Where?”
“Your place.”
Manny hung up.
The protagonist stared at the receiver.
Some technologies made it easier to end arguments.

Manny arrived at eight-fifteen.
“Seven-thirty.”
“I said seven-thirty?”
“Yes.”
“That's crazy.”
The protagonist stared.
Manny looked around the apartment.
“You got beer?”
“No.”
“What kind of twenty-five-year-old are you?”
“The employed kind.”
“Terrible.”

Manny opened the refrigerator anyway.
“Why you got mustard and nothing else?”
“I eat out.”
“You poor?”
“No.”
“Then buy food.”
“Thank you, Mom.”
Manny closed the refrigerator.
“Your mother got food.”
“Exactly.”
This argument seemed decisive.

They went downtown.
No destination explained.
Manny knew somebody.
Naturally.
A bar first.
Then somewhere with music.
The protagonist had stopped caring what category of music proved what category of person he was.
Mostly.
He liked what he liked.
This was either maturity or exhaustion.

At the bar Manny handed him a drink.
“To twenty-five.”
The protagonist raised it.
“To whatever the fuck that means.”
Manny laughed.
“Means you twenty-five.”
“That's very good.”
“I read.”
“Bullshit.”
“Menus.”
They drank.

Later a woman asked where the protagonist was from.
He said:
“The Bronx.”
Simple.
True.
She asked:
“You live there?”
“Not anymore.”
“Where?”
He told her.
She nodded.

Nothing happened.
No biography required.
This felt almost disappointing.

She asked what he did.
“Consulting.”
“What kind?”
He laughed.
“I still don't know.”
She smiled.
“What do you want to do?”
There it was.
The ancient question.
He could have said writing.
Business.
Something with baseball.
He could have invented something better.
“I don't know.”
She looked surprised.
“At twenty-five?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Apparently.”

They danced.
She was attractive.
He wanted her.
This was not complicated.
He had learned enough to know when complication was camouflage.
They kissed later.
Also uncomplicated.
Then she mentioned a boyfriend.
Complication returned immediately.

“You have a boyfriend?”

“Sort of.”
The protagonist laughed.
“What does sort of mean?”
She looked at him.
“You of all people asking that?”
He froze.
“What does that mean?”
She smiled.
“Nothing.”
He studied her.
“Do I know you?”
“No.”
“Then why ‘you of all people’?”
She laughed.
“Because you've spent twenty minutes answering every question with maybe.”
He stared.
Then laughed.
Fair.

He did not go home with her.
This should not be entered into evidence of character.
Her boyfriend had improved the decision considerably.
The narrator has learned something from Chapter Twenty-Three.

Near three, he and Manny walked toward the subway.
Manny said:
“You could've.”
“She has a boyfriend.”
“So?”
The protagonist looked over.
“So no.”
Manny shrugged.
“You're growing.”

“Fuck you.”
“I’m proud.”
“Fuck you twice.”

They walked.
After a block Manny said:
“You hear from Ana?”
The protagonist's face changed before he could stop it.
Manny noticed.
Of course.
“Sometimes.”
“What does that mean?”
“Sometimes.”
“You still love her?”
The protagonist looked ahead.
“Yes.”
No analysis.
Manny nodded.

Ana had returned to New York after graduate school.
Not to him.
That distinction had taken time.
They had lasted long-distance longer than people predicted and shorter than they promised.
There had been no betrayal large enough to organize the ending.
Calls became harder.
Visits became negotiations.
New friends acquired names.
Then histories.
They hurt each other.
Apologized.
Tried again.
Eventually they had a conversation in which neither said the words break up until both understood they already had.

The protagonist had spent months afterward trying to identify the exact moment the relationship ended.
There wasn't one.
This offended him deeply.

Manny said:
“You gonna call her?”
“No.”
“Why?”
“Because it's my birthday?”
“Yeah.”
“That would be pathetic.”
“Probably.”
They walked another half block.
Manny said:
“She called your mother.”
The protagonist stopped.
“What?”
“To say happy birthday.”
“When?”
“Today.”
“How do you know?”
“Your mother.”
“Why the fuck does my mother tell you everything?”
Manny shrugged.
“She likes me.”

The protagonist stood on the sidewalk.
People moved around them.
“You knew all night?”
“Yes.”
“Why didn't you tell me?”
“You didn't ask.”
The protagonist stared.
Manny smiled.

The protagonist almost laughed.
Didn't.

“What did she say?”
“I don't know.”
“You just said—”
“She called your mother. Your mother said Ana called. That's what I know.”
“Did she leave a number?”
“Probably the number she always had.”
“She moved.”
“Then I don't know.”
The protagonist started walking.
Manny followed.

At the subway entrance Manny said:
“You calling?”
“I don't know.”
“Good.”
“Why good?”
“Because if you said no, you'd be lying.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Twenty-five years and you're finally useful.”
Manny smiled.
“Been useful. You were busy reading.”

At home the answering machine light was blinking.
One message.
The protagonist stood looking at it.
Could be anybody.
His mother.
Work.
Manny calling to continue bothering him from his own apartment.
Ana.

He pressed play.
His mother's voice.
“Call me when you get home. And don't call too late.”
Then:
“Actually call tomorrow.”
Pause.
“And Ana called here. I told her you're out. She said happy birthday.”
Another pause.
“She sounds good.”
Click.

He stared at the machine.
“She sounds good.”
What the fuck was he supposed to do with that?
He took off his jacket.
Put it over the chair.
Removed his shoes.
Went to the refrigerator.
Mustard.
Manny was right.
He closed it.

The phone sat on the table.
Ana's number was somewhere.
Maybe he remembered it.
He picked up the receiver.
Dialed six digits.
Stopped.
Hung up.

Cowardice?
Restraint?
Pride?
Respect?

Fear?
Growth?
Pick one.
He could make a case for all six.
At twenty-five, the protagonist had finally developed the intellectual sophistication to understand that naming a motive did not necessarily identify it.
This was inconvenient.

He went to the bathroom.
Brushed his teeth.
Looked at himself.
There should have been something.
Twenty-five.
The number had followed him for years.
Not literally.
He had simply believed, as many people did, that twenty-five represented some mysterious border between becoming and being.
Later generations would acquire popular explanations about frontal lobes and fully developed brains and repeat them with the confidence human beings reserve for scientific ideas they have reduced to one sentence.
The protagonist knew none of this.
He merely looked in the mirror.
Same face.
Older around the eyes maybe.
Hair still there.
Good.
No certificate from the brain.
No internal bell.
No message:
CONGRATULATIONS. JUDGMENT NOW AVAILABLE.
He laughed.

He returned to the bedroom.
The phone remained.
He did not call Ana.
Not that night.
This may have been wise.
It may have been cowardly.
The narrator does not know.
This is becoming more common.

Before bed he picked up the old notebook again.
Seventeen-year-old him:
PEOPLE WANT CERTAINTY MORE THAN TRUTH.
He read it.
The sentence was annoyingly good.
This irritated him.
He turned the page.
Another entry:
I NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHO I AM BEFORE I BECOME SOMEBODY I DON'T WANT TO BE.
He stared.
Then laughed.
“Good luck.”
He said it aloud.

He turned another page.
Mostly crossed-out sentences.
Arguments.
Questions.
A girl's name.
Baseball notes.
Something about his father.
A quotation copied from a book without attribution.
Then, near the bottom:
WHAT AM I NOT SEEING?
He stopped.

No grand revelation.
No sudden communion with the boy who wrote it.
Mostly embarrassment.
Some tenderness.
That was new.

He closed the notebook.
For years he had read his younger self like a prosecutor.
Evidence everywhere.
Hypocrisy.
Arrogance.
Fear.
Pretension.
Cruelty.
Bullshit.
All present.
But the kid had also been trying.
Badly.
Loudly.
Self-importantly.
Still trying.
The protagonist put the notebook back on the desk.
Did not correct anything.

At 1:47 in the morning, now officially twenty-five years and one day old, he got into bed wearing the shirt he had determined that morning was not quite dirty enough to wash.
He smelled the collar.
It had gotten worse.
There were limits to ambiguity.
He took it off.
Threw it toward the laundry pile.
Missed.
Left it on the floor.

Then turned off the light.

Chapter 29

“Dinner”

Ana called on Thursday.
He was at work.
His secretary—though the company called her an administrative assistant because language occasionally improved faster than behavior—leaned into his office.
“Woman on two.”
“Who?”
“Ana.”
He looked up.
The assistant noticed.
“Should I tell her you're out?”
“No.”
She smiled.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Then stop smiling.”
“I’m not.”
She left smiling.
He picked up.
“Hello?”
“Happy birthday.”
Three days late.
“Thank you.”
“I called your mother.”
“I heard.”
“Of course you did.”

“She has an information-distribution agreement with half the city.”
Ana laughed.
He had forgotten exactly how she laughed.
Not the sound.
The timing.
The small inhale before it when she was genuinely amused.
Memory had preserved the melody and misplaced the rhythm.

“How are you?”
“Good.”
“You?”
“Good.”
There it was.
Four years of history reduced to two goods.

“You busy?”
He looked at the files on his desk.
“Yes.”
“Should I call later?”
“No.”
He turned his chair toward the window.
“What are you doing?”
“Working.”
“No, I mean—”
“I know.”
Pause.
Then she laughed.
“Still annoying.”
“Apparently.”

Ana was living downtown now.
Working.
Not exactly what she had expected to be doing.

Nobody was.
She had been back in New York for months.
He knew this indirectly.
His mother knew.
Manny knew.
A mutual friend had mentioned seeing her.
The protagonist had managed to live in the same city without contacting her.
New York makes this easier than people elsewhere imagine.
Eight million people provide excellent camouflage for two.

Ana said:
“I found something of yours.”
“What?”
“A book.”
“That narrows it down.”
“You wrote in it.”
“That narrows it down less.”
She told him the title.
He remembered.
Barely.
He had lent it to her years before.
“Keep it.”
“I don't want it.”
“Very flattering.”
“I already read it.”
“So throw it out.”
“You wrote all over it.”
“Then definitely throw it out.”
She laughed.
“I can bring it to you.”
“You don't have to.”
“I know.”
The sentence hung there.

He said:
“You want to have dinner?”
Silence.
Not long.
Long enough.
“Okay.”

They chose Friday.
Seven.
A restaurant downtown neither had been to.
Neutral territory.
As though geography had jurisdiction over memory.

Friday afternoon Bernstein stopped at his office.
“You leaving?”
“Yes.”
“You have the Carson numbers?”
“On your desk.”
Bernstein nodded.
Then looked at him.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Why does everybody keep doing that?”
“Doing what?”
“Looking at me and saying nothing.”
Bernstein considered.
“Maybe you're becoming paranoid.”
“Thank you.”
“Anytime.”

The protagonist went home first.
This was unnecessary.
He changed shirts.
Also unnecessary.
Then changed back to the first shirt.

Completely unnecessary.
He considered a tie.
Absolutely not.
He put on cologne.
Too much.
Washed some off.
Twenty-five.
Fully developed.

He arrived eleven minutes early.
This irritated him because Ana had spent years accusing him of being late.
He considered waiting outside until seven.
That would be insane.
He went in.

Ana arrived at 7:06.
He noticed.
Of course.
She walked toward the table.
Different hair.
Shorter.
Same face.
Not same.
Older.
Not old.
He stood.
They hugged.
The hug lasted one second longer than friendship required and one second shorter than either would later remember.

“You look good.”
“So do you.”
“You got skinny.”
“You got corporate.”

He looked at his shirt.
“This is a shirt.”
“It’s a corporate shirt.”
“What makes it corporate?”
“It looks like you have opinions about quarterly earnings.”
“I do.”
“See?”
They sat.

The waiter handed them menus.
Ana opened hers.
The protagonist watched her.
She looked up.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You're staring.”
“I haven't seen you.”
“I know.”
He looked at his menu.

They ordered wine.
Neither needed wine.
Both were relieved when it arrived.

For the first twenty minutes they discussed other people.
Safe people.
Her parents.
His parents.
Manny.
Peter.
People from school.
A teacher.
A cousin.
Someone divorced.
Someone married.

Someone had a baby.
Someone moved to Florida.
Someone died.
Life had been occurring aggressively while they were apart.

“Manny still the same?”
“Yes.”
“That poor man.”
“He claims I've gotten worse.”
“He's probably right.”
“Why is everyone against me tonight?”
Ana smiled.
“Because you invite consensus.”

Food arrived.
The protagonist had ordered something he could not pronounce correctly.
Ana noticed.
“Say it again.”
“No.”
“Come on.”
“I hate you.”
“You used to make fun of people for ordering shit they couldn't pronounce.”
“I was seventeen.”
“You were an asshole.”
“I remain an asshole. I have simply diversified.”
She laughed.
He felt good.
Too good.

They talked about work.
Ana had changed jobs once already.
She described her boss.
The protagonist immediately disliked him.

“Why?”
“What?”
“You made a face.”
“He sounds like an asshole.”
“You've heard three stories.”
“Exactly.”
“Three stories is enough?”
He looked at her.
She smiled.
He smiled back.
“Apparently not.”

She asked about Bernstein.
“Still there.”
“You like it?”
“Mostly.”
“That's good.”
“Yeah.”
“You sound disappointed.”
He laughed.
“I thought I'd know what I wanted by now.”
Ana took a sip.
“Why?”
“Because I'm twenty-five.”
She stared.
Then laughed.
Hard.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No. What?”
“You thought twenty-five was going to fix you?”
“I didn't say fix.”
“What word did you use?”
“I didn't use a word.”
“Exactly.”

He laughed.
“Fuck you.”
“Happy birthday.”

The second glass of wine arrived without discussion.
This is how second glasses often become third.

Ana said:
“Are you seeing anyone?”
There it was.
He had wondered when.
“No.”
Not exactly true.
There had been women.
None currently.
None he considered seeing.
Language remained an excellent attorney.
“You?”
Ana looked at the wine.
“Kind of.”
His stomach changed.
Very small.
Immediate.
He hated the body for answering before philosophy.
“Kind of?”
She smiled.
“You of all people asking that?”
He remembered the woman from his birthday.
Different person.
Same sentence.
The universe had become lazy.

“What's his name?”
“David.”

Of course.
There are moments when another man's name seems personally insulting despite having existed before you heard it.
David.
The protagonist disliked David immediately.
“What does he do?”
Ana looked at him.
“Why?”
“Conversation.”
“No. Reconnaissance.”
He laughed.
“Fine.”
“He's a teacher.”
The protagonist disliked this more.
“What does he teach?”
“English.”
“Oh, fuck him.”
Ana laughed.
“You don't even know him.”
“I know enough.”
“You know he teaches English.”
“Exactly.”

Ana was laughing.
The protagonist was too.
Underneath it something had begun tightening.
He recognized it.
Jealousy.
Good.
Name acquired.
Problem solved.
Except naming a fire does not extinguish it.

“Serious?”

Ana's smile changed.
“I don't know.”
“How long?”
“Few months.”
“Few meaning?”
She looked at him.
“There you are.”
“What?”
“The lawyer.”
“I’m asking.”
“You're counting.”
“I’m not counting.”
“You absolutely are.”
He sat back.
“Okay.”
Ana studied him.
“You okay?”
“Yes.”
Lie.
He knew it while saying it.
Said it anyway.

They ate.
The conversation moved elsewhere.
Temporarily.

Ana asked if he still wrote.
“Not much.”
“Why?”
“Work.”
“Bullshit.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
“You always blamed whatever was nearby.”
“That’s unfair.”

“Maybe.”
“No, it is.”
Ana shrugged.
“Then write.”
He felt irritation.
Immediate.
She had no idea how tired he was.
How work expanded.
How rent worked.
How adulthood ate evenings.
How difficult it was to produce anything worth reading after spending all day producing things nobody wanted to read.
He could explain.
He did.

“It's not that simple.”
“I didn't say it was.”
“You just said ‘then write.’”
“Because you said you want to write.”
“I do.”
“So write.”
“That’s exactly the kind of thing people say when—”
Ana leaned back.
There.
He saw her face.
He heard himself.
He could stop.
He did not.
“—when they don't understand what it takes.”
Ana stared.
“What it takes?”
“Yes.”
“You mean writing?”
“Yes.”
She put down her fork.

“I read everything you wrote for years.”
“I know.”
“I listened to you talk about writing for years.”
“I know.”
“I watched you write for years.”
“I know.”
“So what exactly don't I understand?”
He should have stopped.
Again.
He knew.
Again.
Continued.
“You never wanted it the way I did.”
Silence.
There are sentences whose stupidity becomes visible before the final word leaves the mouth.
This was one.

Ana looked at him.
Not angry.
Hurt.
Then angry.
Good.
Anger was easier.
“Wow.”
“I didn't mean—”
“Yes, you did.”
“No. I meant—”
“I know what you meant.”
“You don't.”
She laughed once.
There was nothing funny in it.
“Of course.”

The protagonist felt ashamed.

Then, almost simultaneously, defensive about being ashamed.
This was an old trick.
If he could prove she had misunderstood the sentence, perhaps he would not have to face the reason he had chosen it.
He had chosen it because she had touched something sore.
Writing.
Failure.
The possibility that he had spent years identifying as a writer while doing less and less writing.
David had not caused this.
Ana had not caused this.
He knew that.
He also knew Ana knew where the sore places were.
This made her dangerous.

“I'm sorry.”
Ana looked away.
“I’m serious.”
“Okay.”
“Don't okay me.”
Her eyes came back.
The protagonist closed his.
“Sorry.”

The waiter approached.
Saw them.
Changed direction.
Professional instinct.

Ana said:
“You still do it.”
“What?”

“You hurt somebody and then immediately want them to help you feel better because you know you hurt them.”
The protagonist stared at the table.
“I said I'm sorry.”
“I know.”
“I'm not asking you to—”
“Yes, you are.”
“No.”
“You want me to say it's okay.”
“I don't.”
“Then let me be pissed.”
He looked at her.
This was the moment.
He knew.
Let her be pissed.
Simple.
He could do that.
He had learned things.
He had read things.
He had listened.
He had practiced.
He was twenty-five years old.
Fully fucking developed.
“Fine.”
The word came out wrong.
Ana laughed.
“There.”
“What?”
“That.”
“What the fuck do you want me to say?”
Nothing.
There it was.

Ana looked at him.
“I didn't want anything.”

“You called me.”
“I called to say happy birthday.”
“You asked to bring the book.”
“You asked me to dinner.”
“Because you—”
He stopped.
Too late.

Ana leaned forward.
“Because I what?”
“Nothing.”
“No.”
He looked away.
“Say it.”
He knew better.
Said it anyway.
“Because you wanted to see me.”
Ana stared.
“So did you.”
“I know.”
“Then why are you making it sound like I tricked you?”
“I’m not.”
“You are.”
“I’m saying this isn't all me.”
“What isn't?”
He had no answer.
The fight?
Dinner?
History?
Jealousy?
David?
The breakup?
The fact that she had returned to New York and not returned to him?
He had begun an argument before identifying the charge.

This was poor legal practice.

Ana shook her head.
“You know what?”
“What?”
“I forgot how exhausting this is.”
That one found bone.

The protagonist sat back.
“Then why did you come?”
He regretted it immediately.
Ana's face changed.
There are victories you recognize as losses while achieving them.
He had become very good at these.

“Fuck you.”
“Yeah.”
“No. Fuck you.”
“I know.”
“Stop saying you know.”
He almost laughed.
Didn't.

Ana reached for her bag.
The protagonist said:
“Don't leave.”
“Why?”
“Because I don't want you to.”
“That's not enough.”
“I know.”
She stared.
He held up a hand.
“Sorry.”
Despite herself, the corner of her mouth moved.

Not a smile.
Almost.
She stayed seated.

The waiter returned.
“Everything okay?”
Both said:
“Yes.”
Perfectly synchronized.
The waiter looked between them.
“Coffee?”
Both:
“No.”
They looked at each other.
Ana laughed.
The protagonist did too.
The waiter left.
Human relationships survive partly because absurdity occasionally interrupts murder.

Ana wiped beneath one eye.
Not crying exactly.
He looked away.
Then back.
“I’m sorry.”
She said nothing.
“I was jealous.”
“I know.”
“I know you know.”
She looked at him.
“Careful.”
He smiled faintly.
Then:
“And you were right about the writing.”
Ana's face softened.

“I'm not trying to be right.”
“I know.”
She gave him a look.
“Sorry.”

He rubbed his forehead.
“I haven't written anything good in a long time.”
“Then write something bad.”
He looked up.
She shrugged.
“You used to.”
He laughed.
“That’s incredibly insulting.”
“It’s true.”
“Some of it was good.”
“Some.”
“Fuck you.”
This time warmly.

Ana said:
“You know what I think happened?”
Danger.
“What?”
“You got good at your job.”
He waited.
“And?”
“That's it.”
“That doesn't explain anything.”
“Maybe it doesn't have to.”
He stared.
Ana continued:
“You got good at something. People pay you. They respect you. You know what you're doing. Writing makes you feel stupid again.”
He opened his mouth.

Nothing.
She looked at him.
“You hate feeling stupid.”
He smiled.
“That is a vicious accusation.”
“Is it wrong?”
He thought.
“No.”

They paid.
He insisted.
Ana let him.
No argument.
This disappointed him slightly.

Outside, the city had cooled.
They walked.
No destination.
They had always been good at walking.
Even when they were bad at everything else.

After three blocks Ana said:
“David isn't serious.”
The protagonist looked over.
He hated how relieved he felt.
Ana saw that too.
“Don't.”
“I didn't do anything.”
“Your face did.”
“My face is independent.”
“Always has been.”

He asked:
“You like him?”
“Yes.”

The relief diminished.
Good.
Deserved.
“He good to you?”
Ana looked at him.
“Yes.”
The protagonist nodded.
He meant the nod.
Mostly.

They reached her block.
The protagonist realized only then that they had been walking toward her apartment.
Had she chosen the direction?
Had he?
Neither?
He considered asking.
Did not.

They stopped outside.
Ana held the old book beneath her arm.
She had carried it through dinner.
He had forgotten.
“Oh.”
She handed it to him.
“Your book.”
He took it.
The cover was worn.
Pages swollen slightly from age.
His handwriting visible in the margins.
“You really don't want it?”
“No.”
“Heartless.”
“I've had it seven years.”
“That's basically theft.”

“You knew where I lived.”
“Not always.”
She looked at him.
True.

He opened the front cover.
His handwriting.
A note to Ana.
He read it.
She watched his face.
“What?”
“Jesus.”
“What did you write?”
“You don't remember?”
“No.”
He turned the book away.
“Nothing.”
She reached.
“Give me that.”
“No.”
She grabbed.
He held it above her reach.
They were laughing now.
Twenty-five disappeared.
They were eighteen.
Seventeen.
Idiots.

“Read it.”
“No.”
“You wrote it to me.”
“Exactly.”
“I already read it.”
“Then why do you need to hear it?”
“Because you're embarrassed.”

“That is not a reason.”
“It is an excellent reason.”
She grabbed his wrist.
He lowered the book.
She took it.
Opened the cover.
Read aloud:
“‘Ana—some books tell you something you didn't know. The better ones make you suspicious of what you thought you knew.’”
She stopped.
Looked at him.
The protagonist covered his face.
“Kill me.”
Ana laughed.
“Wait.”
“No.”
“‘You do that to me.’”
“Please.”
She was laughing hard now.
“‘I haven't decided whether to thank you.’”
The protagonist leaned against the building.
“I was seventeen.”
“You were unbearable.”
“I know.”
Ana looked at him.
Both froze.
Then laughed harder.

When the laughter stopped, they were standing too close.
Neither moved.
Ana's hand was still on his wrist.
The protagonist looked at her.
She looked back.
This was not confusing.

The consequences were.

He kissed her.
Or she kissed him.
Years later he would remember both versions.
This is not narrator evasiveness.
It genuinely matters less than people think.
They kissed.
That is what survived.

Ana pulled away first.
“Fuck.”
“Yeah.”
She looked toward her building.
Then at him.
“David.”
The protagonist's jealousy returned with astonishing efficiency.
“You said not serious.”
“That doesn't mean nonexistent.”
He knew this argument.
He had once built entire civilizations inside the space between those words.

“You want me to go?”
Ana looked at him.
She did not answer quickly.
“No.”
There it was.

He went upstairs.
This was a bad decision.
He knew it while climbing the stairs.
Ana knew it while unlocking the door.
Nobody had been deceived by ignorance.

This is important.
People sometimes imagine self-awareness standing at the opposite end of bad behavior.
It is often sitting beside it.

Inside, the apartment looked like Ana.
Not the Ana he remembered.
This one.
Books he didn't know.
Furniture he hadn't helped move.
Photographs containing people he had never met.
A mug from a place he had never been.
A life had formed without him.
He felt something ugly.
Not anger.
Displacement.
He had once been central here.
Not in this apartment.
In her.
The distinction did not help.

Ana put down her bag.
Neither spoke.
He should leave.
He knew.
She knew.
They kissed again.

Later they lay beside each other.
No graphic details are required.
They had once known each other's bodies well.
Bodies remember things the mind has spent years reorganizing.
That was part of the problem.

Ana stared at the ceiling.
“This was stupid.”
“Yes.”
“You're not supposed to agree that fast.”
He smiled.
“Sorry.”
She laughed quietly.
Then stopped.
“David.”
The protagonist said nothing.
Good.
Finally.

“I have to tell him.”
He felt immediate resistance.
Why?
If David wasn't serious.
If they weren't exclusive.
If—
There it was.
The lawyer had survived intercourse.

He said:
“Are you guys exclusive?”
Ana turned her head.
The look was almost magnificent.
“What?”
“I'm asking.”
“I heard you.”
“If you're not—”
She sat up.
The protagonist knew.
Knew.
Continued.
“—then what exactly are you telling him?”

Ana stared.
“Wow.”
“What?”
“You really can't help yourself.”
He felt anger.
At her.
At himself.
At David.
At the fucking book on the floor.
“At least be honest about what the relationship is.”
Ana laughed.
“That's your position?”
“I’m asking a question.”
“No. You're building yourself an exit.”
“I don't need an exit.”
“Then why do you care whether we're exclusive?”
Because if they were not exclusive, he had not done something to another man.
Because if they were not exclusive, Ana had not cheated.
Because if Ana had not cheated, he had not helped her cheat.
Because if nobody had cheated, perhaps the evening could remain what he wanted it to be.
Old love.
Human weakness.
Complicated.
Beautiful, even.
Anything except selfish.
He knew all this.
He still said:
“Because words matter.”
Ana stared at him.
Then laughed.
Not kindly.
“Oh, fuck you.”

He lay back.
“Yeah.”
This time he meant it.

Ana dressed.
He did too.
The room had changed.
Or they had.
Same difference at one in the morning.

At the door Ana said:
“I don't regret seeing you.”
He nodded.
“Me neither.”
“I might regret the rest.”
He looked at her.
“Me too.”
This was not entirely true yet.
He was still too happy.
That shamed him.
Not enough to remove the happiness.
Human beings are inconveniently capable of carrying both.

Ana said:
“I love you.”
He looked at her.
Present tense.
Dangerous tense.
“I love you too.”
Also present.
Neither said therefore.
Good.

He walked home.
Not all the way.

Subway first.
Then several blocks.
The old book under his arm.
He opened it while waiting for the train.
Read his seventeen-year-old note again.
Some books make you suspicious of what you thought you knew.
You do that to me.
He wanted to mock the boy.
Couldn't.
The kid had occasionally landed one.
Accidentally, perhaps.
Still counts.

On the train he thought about David.
Then tried not to.
Then thought about Ana.
Then about writing.
Then work.
Then the fact that he had known better.
That phrase bothered him.
Knew better.
People said it as though knowledge controlled the hands.
He had known better at the restaurant.
Known better outside her building.
Known better on the stairs.
Known better in the apartment.
Known better afterward when he started asking about exclusivity.
At no point had ignorance been the problem.

He got home after two.
The answering machine was dark.
He put Ana's book on the desk beside the old notebooks.
Different years.

Same handwriting.
He opened a notebook to a blank page.
Sat.
Pen in hand.
Nothing came.
He almost laughed.
Ana had told him to write something bad.
Fine.
He wrote:
Tonight I slept with Ana.
Looked at it.
Too simple.
He added:
She is seeing someone.
Then:
I knew.
He stared at the three sentences.
No context.
No childhood.
No loneliness.
No history.
No theory of love.
No ambiguity.
No David being “sort of.”
No explanation of how Ana had called him.
No wine.
No old book.
No present-tense I love you.
Nothing that might improve the lighting.
He hated the page.
For precisely that reason, he left it alone.

Chapter 30

“The Memo”

The meeting began at nine and was supposed to last forty-five minutes.
It lasted three hours.
This was how adults demonstrated importance.
The protagonist sat near the far end of the conference table with a yellow legal pad, two sharpened pencils, and a cup of coffee he no longer wanted.
Bernstein sat at the head.
Across from them were four executives from a regional distribution company.
One of the executives had removed his jacket.
This meant something had become serious.
Another had rolled up his sleeves.
This meant he wanted people to know he understood work.
The protagonist distrusted sleeves rolled specifically for meetings.
He wrote nothing about this.
Progress.

The company had three warehouses.
One was losing money.
Not catastrophically.
Enough.
The numbers had been worsening for two years.
Overtime.
Repairs.

Lower volume.
A lease coming up.
Management wanted to consolidate operations into the two stronger sites.
On paper, this made sense.
The protagonist had helped build the paper.
That was the problem.

The president of the company said:
“So what's the recommendation?”
Bernstein looked at the protagonist.
The protagonist hated when he did that.
Not because he was unprepared.
Because he was prepared.
There are few things more dangerous than a young man with a coherent answer and permission to give it.

The protagonist looked at the numbers.
Then at the president.
“Consolidate.”
Silence.
The operations executive nodded.
Another man looked down.
The president said:
“Timing?”
“Before lease renewal.”
“How many months?”
“Six.”
The man who had looked down finally spoke.
“And the staff?”
The protagonist knew the number.
He had known it for weeks.
“Eighty-four.”
The room changed slightly.
Not visibly.

No one gasped.
No one cursed.
But the number had bodies now.

The president asked:
“How many can transfer?”
The protagonist looked at the notes.
“Maybe twenty.”
“Maybe?”
“Depends on distance and openings.”
“What do you recommend?”
There it was again.
Recommend.
A useful word.
It permitted decisions to sound advisory even when everyone already knew who would absorb them.

“Offer transfers where practical. Severance for the rest.”
The man who had looked down rubbed his forehead.
He was the local operations manager.
The protagonist had met him once before.
His name was Frank.
Frank said:
“Some of these guys been there fifteen, twenty years.”
The protagonist nodded.
“I know.”
Frank looked at him.
The protagonist heard the sentence leave his mouth.
Too smooth.
I know.
He did not know.
He knew the spreadsheet.
Years of service.
Payroll.
Benefits.

Overtime.
Average commute.
He did not know who had a mortgage.
Who had a sick parent.
Who had a kid in college.
Who had no savings.
Who had been counting on another ten years.
He knew enough to make the decision.
Not enough to feel innocent about it.

The president said:
“Can we delay?”
Bernstein answered before the protagonist.
“You can.”
Pause.
“It costs you.”
“How much?”
The protagonist gave the number.
That was his part.
Numbers.
The room became quieter again.
Money does this very efficiently.

Frank said:
“What if volume picks up?”
The protagonist looked at him.
“We modeled it.”
“I know you modeled it.”
Frank's tone changed.
Not hostile.
Worse.
Tired.
“What if you're wrong?”
The protagonist felt everybody look at him.
He could defend the model.

He had scenarios.
Sensitivity ranges.
Best case.
Worst case.
Break-even.
He knew the argument.
He also knew the answer.
“We could be.”
Frank stared.
The protagonist continued:
“But you'd still be carrying the lease, repairs, overtime, and underutilized capacity while hoping demand reverses.”
Frank said nothing.
The protagonist hated how reasonable that sounded.

The president leaned back.
“So the recommendation stands.”
Bernstein looked at the protagonist.
The protagonist nodded.
“Yes.”
There.
No villainy.
No cigar.
No cruelty.
No triumph.
Just yes.

The meeting ended at noon.
Everyone shook hands.
This offended him slightly.
People always shook hands after decisions that required other people to suffer.
As though cleanliness could be restored by skin contact.
He shook anyway.

Frank was last to leave.
At the door he stopped.
Looked at the protagonist.
“You ever work in a warehouse?”
The protagonist smiled faintly.
“Yes.”
Frank seemed surprised.
“Really?”
“Years ago.”
“You load?”
“Boxes. Inventory. Delivery. Little bit of everything.”
Frank nodded.
“Then you know.”
The protagonist almost said yes.
Did not.
“No.”
Frank looked at him.
The protagonist continued:
“I know some of it.”
Frank stared another second.
Then nodded.
“Fair enough.”
He left.
That felt worse than anger.

Bernstein closed the conference-room door.
“You okay?”
The protagonist gathered papers.
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
Bernstein sat.
“Good.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“That's it?”

“What do you want?”
“I don't know.”
Bernstein smiled.
“Still twenty-five.”
“Fuck you.”

Bernstein picked up the financial model.
“You think recommendation's wrong?”
“No.”
“Then what's bothering you?”
The protagonist sat.
“Eighty-four.”
Bernstein nodded.
“Yeah.”
“That doesn't bother you?”
“Yes.”
The protagonist stared.
Bernstein leaned back.
“You think if it bothers me, we don't do it?”
“I don't know.”
“That would be convenient.”
The protagonist said nothing.
Bernstein continued.
“You think they keep that place open because people work there?”
“That's one reason.”
“No.”
Bernstein shook his head.
“That's why people wish they could keep it open.”
Different sentence.
The protagonist felt it.

Bernstein said:
“Your job is not to make pain disappear.”
“What is it?”

“To tell them what the options cost.”
“That's it?”
“No.”
Bernstein looked at him.
“Your other job is not to become a fucking machine.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Useful distinction.”
“It is.”

They sat quietly.
Bernstein said:
“You know the easiest kind of asshole in this business?”
“No.”
“The one who pretends numbers aren't about people.”
The protagonist nodded.
Bernstein continued.
“The second easiest is the one who pretends caring about people makes bad numbers disappear.”
There it was.
The trap.
He could see both sides.
He almost laughed.
Of course.

Bernstein said:
“You're not paid to feel nothing.”
“Good.”
“You're also not paid to feel so much you stop thinking.”
The protagonist looked down.
“That's harder.”
“That's why they pay you.”

Back at his desk, the protagonist opened the draft memo.
It was clean.
Very clean.

Too clean.
Paragraph one:
The northern facility continues to generate operating losses due to declining throughput, rising maintenance expense, and fixed lease obligations.
Paragraph two:
We recommend consolidation into the central and southern facilities prior to lease renewal.
Paragraph three:
Estimated annualized savings…
The memo was good.
Excellent, actually.
Clear.
Direct.
Professional.
Bernstein would like it.
The protagonist hated it.

He added a sentence.
The consolidation would eliminate approximately sixty-four positions after expected transfers.
Read it.
Too blunt?
No.
Accurate.
He left it.
Then added:
We recommend advance notice, meaningful severance, and transfer preference for long-tenured employees where feasible.
He stared.
Meaningful severance.
What the fuck did meaningful mean?
Three weeks?
Six?

Twelve?
The adjective was doing moral labor the company would have to pay for.
He deleted meaningful.
Wrote:
Twelve weeks severance for employees with ten or more years of service. Six weeks for all others.
There.
Money.
Actual.
Not sentiment.

He walked the memo into Bernstein's office.
Bernstein read.
Stopped at severance.
Looked up.
“They didn't ask for this.”
“I know.”
“Costs them.”
“I know.”
“How much?”
The protagonist gave the number.
Bernstein nodded.
“Defensible?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because if we're telling them closing now is financially rational, then pretending the people absorbing the decision cost nothing is bullshit.”
Bernstein looked at him.
The protagonist felt heat rise.
He had become eloquent.
Danger.
Bernstein said:
“Good.”

That was all.
He initialed the memo.

The company accepted the recommendation two days later.
Including severance.
Not exactly as proposed.
Reduced.
Of course.
Eight weeks.
Four.
The protagonist was angry.
Then embarrassed by his anger because the entire premise remained that people were losing jobs.
He had begun arguing over the quality of the bandage.
Still mattered.
Not enough.
Both.
There it was again.
He mentally fined himself one dollar.

He called Sal that evening.
Hadn't spoken in months.
Sal answered on the fourth ring.
“Yeah?”
“Sal?”
“Who?”
The protagonist gave his name.
Pause.
“College!”
He smiled.
“Still?”
“You'll be sixty and you'll be College.”
“How are you?”
“Alive.”
“Good.”

“Debatable.”

They talked.
Sal's daughter had finished nursing school.
Working now.
Mother working less.
Sal still working too much.
The protagonist told him about the warehouse.
Not every detail.
Enough.
Sal listened.
Then:
“So what you want from me?”
The protagonist smiled.
“Nothing.”
“Bullshit.”
“I wanted to ask what you think.”
“About what?”
“Closing it.”
Sal laughed.
“You asking the guy who used to tell you to carry boxes what a company should do?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“I don't know.”
“Excellent.”

The protagonist explained again.
Costs.
Lease.
Losses.
Jobs.
Transfers.
Severance.
Sal interrupted.

“You think they should close?”
“Yes.”
“Then close.”
The protagonist was annoyed.
“That simple?”
“No.”
Sal's voice changed.
“Simple and easy ain't same thing, College.”
The protagonist leaned back.

Sal said:
“You think keeping people in a dying place helps them?”
“Maybe for a while.”
“Maybe.”
“You think firing them helps?”
“No.”
“Okay.”
The protagonist waited.
Sal continued:
“Sometimes everything sucks.”
“That’s your wisdom?”
“Yeah.”
“Very disappointing.”
“Life is disappointing.”

The protagonist laughed.
Then:
“How do you not become numb to it?”
Sal was quiet.
“Who says I don't?”
The protagonist said nothing.
Sal continued.
“Sometimes I do. Then my wife yells at me. Then I come back.”
The protagonist smiled.

“That's it?”
“What you want, a book?”
“No.”
“Good. You got enough books.”

They hung up.
The protagonist sat at his desk.
The old notebook from seventeen was still there.
Ana's book too.
He looked at both.
Did not open either.
Good.

The next morning Frank called.
The operations manager.
“Got a minute?”
“Yeah.”
“You guys finalized?”
“Yes.”
Frank was quiet.
“How long?”
“Announcement Monday.”
“Okay.”
The protagonist heard his breathing.
Then Frank said:
“They're giving severance.”
“Yes.”
“That you?”
The protagonist looked at the wall.
“Partly.”
Frank was quiet again.
“Thanks.”
The protagonist hated the thanks.
It felt obscene.
“You don't have to thank me.”

“I know.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
There it was.

Frank said:
“Still closing.”
“Yes.”
“Yeah.”
Silence.
The protagonist had nothing useful.
No sentence.
No framework.
No mitigation.
Then Frank said:
“You ever miss loading boxes?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Sometimes.”
“Bullshit.”
“Yeah.”
Frank laughed too.
That helped.
Very little.
Enough.

Monday morning the company announced the closure.
The protagonist was not there.
He had no reason to be.
This bothered him.
He had helped make the recommendation.
Other people delivered it.
Other people watched faces.
Other people answered questions.
Other people absorbed anger.
He got the numbers later.
Exactly as projected.

Transfers.
Severance.
Estimated savings.
The spreadsheet behaved beautifully.

That night he went to his mother's house for dinner.
His father was watching television.
His mother was cooking.
The protagonist sat at the table.
His mother said:
“You look tired.”
“Everybody says that.”
“Because you look tired.”
“Very sophisticated.”
“Eat.”
She put food down.
He ate.

His father asked about work.
The protagonist told him.
Not all.
Enough.
“Had to close a place.”
“You closed it?”
“We recommended.”
“How many people?”
“Sixty-four after transfers.”
His father nodded slowly.
“That's a lot.”
“Yeah.”
“You think company had to?”
“Yes.”
His father ate.
The protagonist waited for something.
His father said:

“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You got that face.”
“What face?”
“The one where you want somebody to tell you you're good.”
The protagonist stared.
His mother laughed from the stove.
His father kept eating.

The protagonist said:
“I don't want that.”
His father shrugged.
“Good.”
Pause.
“Then don't ask.”
The protagonist looked down.
That one hurt.
Accurate enough.

His mother sat.
“What happened to the people?”
“Some transfer. Rest severance.”
“How much?”
He told her.
She frowned.
“Not enough.”
“I know.”
“Could company pay more?”
“Yes.”
“Then why don't they?”
“Because they don't have to.”
His mother looked at him.
He immediately regretted the sentence.
Not because it was false.
Because of how cleanly it arrived.

His mother said:
“That don't mean they shouldn't.”
“I know.”
She looked at him.
He laughed.
“What?”
“Nothing.”

His father said:
“Company gonna save?”
“Yes.”
“Workers lose?”
“Yes.”
“Then somebody wins.”
The protagonist shook his head.
“Not exactly.”
His father looked at him.
“Who got money?”
“The company.”
“Who lost job?”
“The workers.”
“Sounds exact.”
The protagonist felt irritation.
The analysis was too simple.
He wanted to explain fixed costs, competitiveness, long-term viability, capital allocation, the risk that preserving one site could eventually threaten all three.
He began.
His father listened for maybe twenty seconds.
Then:
“You think I'm saying don't close?”
The protagonist stopped.
“Aren't you?”
“No.”

His father shrugged.
“I'm saying don't bullshit me that nobody wins.”
There.
The protagonist sat back.

His mother served more food.
Nobody spoke for a while.
The television in the next room carried some commercial too loudly.
His father got up to lower it.
The protagonist watched him walk.
Slight stiffness now.
Knees maybe.
Age arriving quietly.
No announcement.

After dinner the protagonist washed dishes.
His mother told him to leave them.
He didn't.
His father dried.
This arrangement felt strangely formal.
The protagonist washed.
Father dried.
Mother put away.
Three people.
No theory.

His father said:
“You remember when you sent me that check?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Unfortunately.”
“Twenty-five dollars.”
“I know.”
“Bounced.”
“I know.”

His father smiled.
“You were stupid.”
“Thank you.”
“You still stupid?”
“Yes.”
“Good.”
The protagonist looked over.
His father shrugged.
“Means you know.”

The protagonist almost corrected him.
Knowing you're stupid doesn't prevent stupidity.
Then thought better of it.
The distinction could survive unspoken.

At home later, he opened the notebook.
Blank page.
He wrote:
We closed the warehouse.
Then:
It was probably the right decision.
He stopped.
Probably.
Good word.
Coward's word?
Accurate word?
He left it.
Then:
Sixty-four people lost their jobs.
He stared.
The page looked similar to the one after Ana.
Simple sentences.
Bad lighting.

He added:

We recommended severance. They reduced it. I was angry. I still recommended closing the building.
No defense.
Not yet.

He sat for a long time.
Then wrote:
I am not sure compassion means refusing to cause pain.
Stopped.
Too polished.
Crossed it out.
Wrote:
Sometimes I hurt people for reasons I still think are good.
Better.
Worse.
Truer.
Maybe.

He closed the notebook.
The phone rang.
Ana.
He knew before answering.
This did not make anything easier.
He picked up.
“Hello?”
Her voice:
“I told David.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
There it was.
The warehouse disappeared.
Work disappeared.
Severance disappeared.
Ethics became suddenly local again.
“What did he say?”
Ana was quiet.

Then:
“He asked me if I still love you.”
The protagonist gripped the receiver.
“What did you say?”
Silence.
Long.
Then:
“I told him yes.”
The protagonist did not move.
Ana continued:
“And I told him that doesn't mean I know what to do with that.”
He sat.
No explanation came.
For once, none was available fast enough.
He said:
“Okay.”
Ana laughed softly.
Not happy.
Not sad.
Something between.
“Okay.”
They stayed on the line.
Neither spoke.
The city moved outside his window.
Somewhere, sixty-four people were figuring out what came next.
Somewhere, David was doing the same.
The protagonist held the phone and listened to Ana breathe.
He had no recommendation.

Chapter 31

“The Story Everyone Remembers”

The argument began over a burned piece of chicken.
His mother had invited too many people.
Again.
Sunday.
Apartment warm from the stove.
Windows cracked even though it was cold outside because ten people, two burners, one oven, several coats, and an argument about baseball had made the room uninhabitable.
The protagonist sat at the table with Manny, an uncle, a cousin, two family friends, his parents, and a woman named Evelyn who had known him since he was a child and therefore believed herself constitutionally authorized to correct him.
She was.
Mostly.
His mother put down a platter.
One piece was black at the edge.
Manny reached first.
The protagonist slapped his hand away.
“That’s mine.”
“Why?”
“I like it burned.”
“No you don't.”
“Yes I do.”
“You used to scrape burned shit off.”
“That was when I was twelve.”

Evelyn laughed.
“No. You always liked the burnt pieces.”
The protagonist looked at her.
“No, I didn't.”
“Yes.”
His mother turned from the stove.
“You did.”
The protagonist looked around.
“What the fuck is this?”
His father said:
“You liked burnt chicken.”
“I did not.”
Manny leaned back.
“This is excellent.”

The protagonist pointed at his mother.
“You used to cut the burned part off.”
“For your brother.”
“Exactly.”
“For you I left it.”
“That is not true.”
Evelyn nodded.
“She's right.”
“How would you know?”
“I was there.”
“When?”
“Your mother's apartment.”
“This is my mother's apartment.”
“The other one.”
Which other one?
There had been several.
The protagonist felt the room slipping.

His mother said:
“You always wanted the crispy part.”

“That is not the same as burned.”
Manny laughed.
“Lawyer.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Those are objectively different conditions.”
Manny raised his hands.
“I don't know chicken law.”

His father took the burned piece.
“Problem solved.”
The protagonist stared.
“That was mine.”
Everybody laughed.

For several minutes the argument disappeared beneath food.
Rice.
Beans.
Chicken.
Bread.
A bowl of salad nobody touched until his mother began pointing at it.
The protagonist ate.
Manny ate more.
His father ate the burned chicken.
The protagonist watched him and felt irrationally robbed.

Then Evelyn said:
“You were always like this.”
The protagonist looked up.
“Like what?”
“You need the story exactly.”
Manny laughed with food in his mouth.
The protagonist waited.
Evelyn pointed her fork at him.
“When the blackout happened.”

The protagonist stopped.
There it was.
Ancient history.

“What about it?”
“You remember that radio?”
“Yes.”
“You broke it.”
The table changed.
His mother looked over.
The protagonist smiled.
“I did not break the radio.”
Manny already knew.
He leaned back.
“Oh, here we go.”

Evelyn said:
“You dropped it.”
“I knocked it.”
“Onto the floor.”
“That is generally what happens after knocking something.”
His father laughed.
His mother looked suspicious.
“You said it stopped working.”
“It did.”
“You said nobody touched it.”
“I don't remember saying that.”
Everyone laughed harder.

The protagonist looked at Manny.
“You were there.”
Manny held up both hands.
“I've waited fifteen years for this.”
“You know I didn't exactly lie.”
His mother looked at him.

“What does exactly mean?”
Manny slapped the table.
“Perfect.”

The protagonist felt seventeen again.
Eleven.
Nine.
Every age he had ever been became available when family gathered.
This was one of the cruel efficiencies of relatives.

Evelyn said:
“You told everybody the blackout did it.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“I said it stopped working around the blackout.”
Manny put his head down.
His shoulders moved.
His father laughed so hard he coughed.

The protagonist pointed at Manny.
“You know that's what happened.”
Manny looked up.
“What happened is you broke the radio.”
“I did not break it.”
“You knocked it off a table.”
“And then it worked.”
“For how long?”
“Long enough.”
“That is not a unit of time.”
The protagonist stared.
“Who the fuck taught you that sentence?”
Manny smiled.
“You.”

His mother sat down.
“Wait.”
Everybody quieted slightly.
She looked at the protagonist.
“You broke that radio?”
“No.”
Manny inhaled sharply.
The protagonist corrected himself.
“I damaged it.”
The room exploded.

His mother hit him on the shoulder.
Not hard.
“You liar.”
“I wasn't lying.”
“You said nobody touched it.”
“I was eleven.”
“You were a liar at eleven.”
“That feels developmentally normal.”
His father said:
“Still sounds normal.”

The protagonist laughed.
Then stopped.
Something bothered him.
“Wait.”
He looked at Evelyn.
“How do you know?”
“What?”
“You weren't there when it fell.”
Evelyn paused.
“I heard.”
“From who?”
She looked around.
“Your mother?”

His mother shook her head.
“I didn't know.”
Manny said:
“I probably told somebody.”
“You didn't know either.”
“I knew.”
“You came after.”
Manny frowned.
“Did I?”
There.
Small.
Interesting.

The protagonist sat back.
“You weren't there.”
Manny looked annoyed.
“Yes I was.”
“No. You came later.”
“Bullshit.”
“You came after the lights went out.”
“I was there before.”
“No.”
“How do you know?”
The protagonist opened his mouth.
Stopped.
How did he know?
He saw the room.
Radio.
Table.
Window.
Darkness.
Manny's face.
Or did he see Manny's face because Manny had been in the story for fifteen years?

Manny said:
“I remember you knocking it over.”
The protagonist stared.
“You do?”
“Yes.”
“Actually?”
“Yes.”
Evelyn laughed.
“Now you don't know?”
The protagonist ignored her.
“What was playing?”
Manny looked at him.
“What?”
“On the radio.”
“How the fuck would I know?”
“What room were we in?”
“Living room.”
“What table?”
Manny stared.
“You conducting discovery?”
The protagonist smiled.
“No. Seriously.”

Manny put down his fork.
“Small table by the window.”
The protagonist felt something.
Maybe recognition.
Maybe suggestion.
There had been a table by the window.
Probably.
His mother said:
“No.”
Everyone turned.
“The radio was in the kitchen.”
The protagonist looked at her.

“No, it wasn't.”
“Yes.”
“No.”
His father said:
“It was in the living room.”
His mother looked at him.
“You didn't even live there yet.”
Silence.
Then everybody laughed.
Even his father.

“Okay,” his father said. “Then I don't know shit.”
Manny pointed.
“Finally an honest man.”

The protagonist smiled.
But his mind had begun working.
Dangerously.
He could see two rooms now.
Living room.
Kitchen.
Radio in each.
Memory offered both with equal confidence.
This offended him.

His mother said:
“You had that little radio in the kitchen.”
“That was a different radio.”
“What other radio?”
“The brown one.”
“It was black.”
“No, the black one came later.”
Evelyn said:
“There was definitely a brown radio.”
The protagonist pointed at her.

“Thank you.”
Evelyn continued:
“But I think that was mine.”
Manny fell against the chair laughing.

The protagonist rubbed his forehead.
“Jesus Christ.”
His father said:
“Just eat.”

They did.
But the story had opened something.
Manny was enjoying himself too much to let it close.
“You remember California?”
The protagonist froze.
His mother looked up.
“What California?”
Manny's face changed.
He had not intended this audience.
The protagonist saw it.
Too late.

“Nothing.”
His mother stared.
“What California?”
Manny looked at the protagonist.
The protagonist looked back.
Years ago this would have been catastrophe.
Now?
Still not ideal.

Evelyn said:
“He went to California?”
“No,” Manny said.
The protagonist said:

“Yes.”
They looked at each other.
Manny started laughing again.
His mother said:
“Which is it?”
The protagonist leaned back.
“I went eventually.”
“Eventually when?”
“Later.”
“That wasn't the story,” Manny said.
His mother looked delighted now.
“What story?”

The protagonist smiled.
“Apparently when I was twelve I told somebody I was from California.”
His mother stopped.
Then laughed.
Not gently.
The kind of laughter that requires grabbing the edge of the table.
His father joined.
Evelyn too.
The protagonist waited.

His mother wiped her eyes.
“Why?”
He shrugged.
“Girl.”
That restarted everyone.

Manny said:
“Denise.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“It wasn't Denise.”

“Yes it was.”
“No.”
“Definitely Denise.”
The protagonist frowned.
He had remembered Denise.
Hadn't he?
A girl.
Maybe Denise.
Wait.

Evelyn said:
“Which Denise?”
His mother said:
“From the block?”
Manny nodded.
The protagonist shook his head.
“No, the girl was older.”
Manny stared.
“She was our age.”
“No.”
“You told her you surfed.”
The protagonist laughed.
“I never said I surfed.”
Manny slapped the table.
“You absolutely said you surfed.”
“No fucking way.”
“You had never seen a surfboard.”
“I knew what surfing was.”
“That makes it worse.”

The protagonist looked at his mother.
She was staring at him with delight.
Not judgment.
This embarrassed him more.
“You really told people you were from California?”

“One person.”
Manny coughed.
“Several.”
“One originally.”
“Then architecture.”
“That was later.”
“Blackie's manager.”
His father's head turned.
“What?”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“Manny.”
“What is Blackie's manager?”
“Nothing.”
Manny was already crying.

The protagonist looked at the table.
This had gotten out of control.
His mother demanded the story.
Manny told it.
Badly.
Incorrectly.
Beautifully.

According to Manny, the protagonist had once convinced an entire nightclub that he worked for a major drug dealer.
False.
There had been no entire nightclub.
According to Manny, he had purchased twenty pounds of flour.
“Fifteen.”
Manny ignored him.
According to Manny, he had arranged a fake cocaine delivery to impress women.
The protagonist objected.
“That is reductive.”

Manny laughed.
“What part?”
“It wasn't exactly to impress them.”
Everyone looked at him.
The protagonist paused.
“Okay. That was part.”

Manny continued.
Three men had come running into the apartment.
“No.”
“Yes.”
“They ran into the building.”
“Same thing.”
“Not remotely.”
“You were already in the car.”
“We all were.”
“How do you know where they went?”
“We saw them.”
“What floor?”
“I don't know.”
“Exactly.”
Manny stared.
“What does floor have to do with it?”
“Everything if you're saying they ran into the apartment.”
His mother raised both hands.
“Stop.”
Everyone stopped.
She looked at her son.
“You bought fifteen pounds of flour to pretend it was drugs?”
He looked at her.
“Yes.”
She stared.
Then:
“You were always stupid.”
His father nodded.

“Expensive stupid.”
“It wasn't that expensive.”
His mother pointed.
“That's your answer?”
The protagonist laughed.

Then Evelyn said:
“Wait. Did those guys hurt anybody?”
The table changed again.
The protagonist looked at Manny.
Manny looked at him.
Neither knew.

“No.”
The protagonist said it.
Too quickly.
Evelyn looked at him.
“How do you know?”
He paused.
There.
Again.

Years ago he had told the story afterward.
Many times.
The ending had become clean.
Everybody fine.
Flour discovered.
Women laughing.
Men confused.
No consequence.
He could see it.
Could hear it.
Could remember someone saying it had all worked out.
Who?
Manny?

Another friend?
Had they called?
Had one of the women told someone later?
He searched.
Nothing held.

Manny said:
“I thought we heard they were okay.”
“From who?”
“I don't know.”
The protagonist looked at him.
“You told me.”
“Maybe.”
“Did you?”
Manny frowned.
“I remember somebody saying it.”
“Who?”
“I don't know.”

His mother looked between them.
“So you don't know.”
The protagonist felt irritation.
“We would have heard.”
“Would you?”
“Yes.”
“How?”
He opened his mouth.
Nothing.
This was 1980-something.
No social media.
No searchable aftermath.
No group text.
No mutual online trail.
People disappeared from stories easily then.
Sometimes because nothing happened.

Sometimes because nobody knew.

Evelyn said:
“Maybe nothing happened.”
The protagonist nodded.
“Probably.”
Probably.
That word again.

Manny looked at him.
“You always tell it like they were fine.”
The protagonist stared.
“You do too.”
“Yeah.”
“Why?”
Manny shrugged.
“Because otherwise the story sucks.”
Silence.
There.

The protagonist leaned back.
Everyone around the table had heard it.
Not the confession.
Something worse.
The mechanism.

His father said:
“Maybe they were fine.”
The protagonist nodded.
“Maybe.”
His mother said:
“You were still an idiot.”
“Yes.”
No argument.

The conversation moved.
Eventually.
Food does that.
Someone mentioned a cousin.
Baseball.
Rent.
A neighbor.
Politics.
His mother brought dessert.
The evening continued because evenings do not understand when literature has reached a useful moment.

Later Manny and the protagonist walked outside.
Cold.
Hands in pockets.
Neither spoke for a block.
Then Manny said:
“Fifteen pounds?”
“Yes.”
“I remember twenty.”
“It was three five-pound bags.”
“You sure?”
The protagonist stopped.
“Yes.”
Manny looked at him.
“You sure?”
The protagonist could see the bags.
Golden Meadow.
Five pounds.
Three.
He could see the clerk.
Gallon plastic bags.
His friends laughing.
Sharp.
Specific.

Absolutely certain.
Which suddenly meant less than it had that morning.

“Yes.”
Manny nodded.
“Okay.”
They walked.

After another block the protagonist said:
“Were you there when I broke the radio?”
Manny laughed.
“Damaged.”
“Fuck you.”
“I don't know.”
“You said you remembered.”
“I do.”
“How can you remember and not know?”
Manny looked at him.
“You tell me, Professor.”

The protagonist hated this answer.
Because it was his kind.

They stopped at a bodega.
Manny bought cigarettes.
The protagonist bought gum.
Outside, Manny lit one.
“You remember La Mirage?”
“Yeah.”
“That girl with the white boots?”
The protagonist smiled.
“What girl?”
Manny stared.
“You don't remember?”
“No.”

“The one you spent all night talking to.”
“I never went to La Mirage with you.”
Manny stopped walking.
“Yes you did.”
“No.”
“Bullshit.”
“I went with Carlos.”
“Carlos wasn't there.”
The protagonist stared.
“Of course he was.”
“No.”

They stood beneath the awning.
Suddenly both serious.
The protagonist said:
“What year?”
Manny named one.
The protagonist shook his head.
“I was at school.”
“You came home.”
“Maybe.”
“You wore that gray jacket.”
The protagonist remembered the jacket.
He also remembered wearing it to Limelight.
Maybe People's.
Maybe nowhere Manny had mentioned.

Manny smiled.
“Oh, this is gonna fuck you up.”
“Shut up.”
“You don't remember white boots?”
“No.”
“You loved that girl for like four hours.”
“Apparently I've had a rich emotional life.”
Manny laughed.

The protagonist said:
“What happened?”
“Nothing.”
“Then why would I remember?”
“You talked about her for a week.”
“I did not.”
“You did.”
“Name?”
Manny thought.
Nothing.
“Exactly.”
“Fuck you. I don't remember names.”
“Neither do I.”
They looked at each other.
Both laughed.

On the subway home the protagonist tried to reconstruct La Mirage.
Music.
Lights.
Gray jacket.
White boots.
A woman's face began forming.
This frightened him.
Was he remembering?
Or illustrating Manny's story?
He deliberately changed the boots to red.
The image resisted.
White.
Did that prove anything?
No.
Excellent.

At home he opened the old notebooks.

Not to discover himself.
To check.
Different motivation.
Same addiction.

He searched dates.
Pages.
Names.
Music.
Clubs.
Girls.
California.
Ana.
Manny.
Baseball.
School.
Work.
He found an entry mentioning La Mirage.
His pulse jumped.
Three lines.
LA MIRAGE SAT. MANNY IS AN ASSHOLE.
He stared.
Then laughed.
Manny had been there.
Apparently.

Below:
MET GIRL FROM QUEENS.
No boots.
No name.
Next line crossed out.
He held the notebook closer.
Could almost read it.
Something:
She—

No.
Maybe:
Sh—
Useless.
He turned the page.
Different topic.
Capital punishment.
Of course.

He called Manny.
It was late.
Manny answered annoyed.
“What?”
“You were right.”
Pause.
“About what?”
“La Mirage.”
Longer pause.
“White boots?”
“No evidence.”
“Fuck you. White boots.”
“The notebook says Manny.”
Manny laughed.
“You wrote about me?”
“Unfortunately.”
“What'd you say?”
“That you're an asshole.”
“Accurate.”

The protagonist looked at the page.
“Do you remember why?”
“Probably because I told you the girl wasn't into you.”
The protagonist smiled.
“That sounds plausible.”
“It's true.”

“How do you know?”
“Because I remember.”
The protagonist laughed.
Manny understood.
“Fuck you.”

They hung up.
The protagonist kept reading.
The notebooks should have settled things.
Instead they made it worse.
Entries contradicted dates he remembered.
People appeared before he thought he met them.
Events he considered important received no mention.
Trivial moments occupied pages.
Some handwriting was so emphatic he distrusted it on sight.
The seventeen-year-old had written with the confidence of a witness under oath and the filing habits of a raccoon.

He found Ana's name.
Stopped.
A page from years earlier.
After one of their fights.
He read.
According to the notebook, Ana had said:
YOU DON'T LOVE ME. YOU LOVE BEING THE PERSON WHO LOVES ME.
The protagonist froze.
He remembered the sentence.
Clearly.
Ana standing near a window.
Angry.
Beautiful.
He had carried that sentence for years.
But now something felt wrong.
Too good.

Too complete.
Too much like something he would write.

Had Ana actually said it?
Maybe.
Could have.
She was capable of it.
But the wording.
That fucking wording.
He stared at the quotation marks.
Had seventeen-year-old him improved her?
He had already admitted doing this in college.
Made things clearer.
Peter had asked.
Then you're choosing the scene.

The protagonist sat back.
The room felt different.
Not because one quote might be wrong.
Because dozens might be.
Hundreds.

The narrator would like to help here.
Unfortunately, the narrator has been relying on much of the same material.
Not exclusively.
There were witnesses.
Newspapers.
Dates.
Places.
Family stories.
Manny, God help us.
But yes, notebooks too.
And memory.

And stories told after enough years that each teller had performed unauthorized renovations.
This is awkward.

The protagonist turned pages faster.
His own words everywhere.
Statements.
Corrections.
Arguments.
Versions.
He had thought the notebooks were evidence.
They were.
Of what?
That he wrote something down.
Beyond that, negotiations begin.

The telephone rang.
He jumped.
Ana.
Again.
“Hey.”
“Hey.”
“You okay?”
“Yes.”
Pause.
“No.”
“What happened?”
He looked at the notebook.
“Did you ever tell me I loved being the person who loved you?”
Silence.
“What?”
He read the sentence.
Ana was quiet.
Then:

“That sounds like me.”
His stomach dropped.
“So you said it?”
“I don't know.”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean I don't remember.”
“You don't remember saying that?”
“No.”
“It was a whole fight.”
“We had several.”
“I remember where you were standing.”
Ana laughed softly.
“That doesn't mean I remember.”

He described the room.
Window.
Her shirt.
Rain maybe.
Ana interrupted.
“Wait.”
“What?”
“Was that at my apartment?”
“Yes.”
“I never had a window there.”
He stopped.
“What?”
“The bedroom didn't have a window like that.”
“Yes it did.”
“No.”
He could see it.
Absolutely see it.
“You had one near the—”
“That was your room.”
Silence.

He looked around his current apartment as though the old window might appear.
“Are you sure?”
Ana laughed.
“Yes.”
Then:
“I think.”
They both went quiet.

The protagonist said:
“This is disturbing.”
Ana laughed.
“Why?”
“Because I remember it.”
“Maybe we had the fight in your room.”
“Maybe.”
“Maybe I said it.”
“Maybe.”
“Maybe you said it.”
He stopped.
“What?”
Ana continued:
“That sounds like you too.”
The protagonist stared at the notebook.
Fuck.

“Why would I write it as you?”
“I don't know.”
“That's insane.”
“You were dramatic.”
“I was not—”
He stopped.
Ana laughed.
“Twenty-five.”
“Fuck you.”

They stayed on the phone.
He told her about dinner.
Radio.
California.
Blackie's manager.
La Mirage.
White boots.
She laughed.
Then became quiet when he mentioned the uncertain ending of Blackie's manager.
“You don't know what happened?”
“I thought I did.”
“What did you think?”
“That everybody was fine.”
“Why?”
“I don't know.”

Ana said:
“You used to tell that story like a comedy.”
“I know.”
“Maybe it was.”
“Maybe.”
“Maybe not.”
“Yeah.”

He closed the notebook.
Ana said:
“You know, memory isn't a court transcript.”
“Apparently.”
“You always wanted it to be.”
He smiled.
“Apparently.”

After they hung up he sat at the desk.

No writing.
No corrections.
Just sat.
Outside, someone shouted from the street.
Car horn.
Radiator knocking.
A siren somewhere farther away.
All of it present.
All of it already disappearing.

He thought of his uncle's funeral.
The family making the dead man cleaner within hours.
Never complained.
Always generous.
He had judged them for it.
Maybe they were not lying.
Maybe memory did what grief required.
Maybe memory did what pride required.
Maybe shame.
Love.
Fear.
Comedy.
Survival.
Maybe every remembered life was partly collaboration.
That did not mean nothing happened.
That was the temptation now.
If memory was unreliable, he could escape everything.
California?
Who knows.
Ana?
Who knows.
Cruel sentences?
Who knows.
Flour?
Maybe twenty pounds.

Maybe none.
Convenient.
No.
Something happened.
People were hurt.
People were loved.
He had made choices.
Uncertainty about the camera angle did not erase the act.

He opened the notebook to a blank page.
Started writing.
Stopped.
He wanted to record what had happened tonight.
Immediately saw the problem.
Which version?
Chicken first?
Radio first?
Did Evelyn introduce blackout or Manny?
What exact sentence did his mother use?
Had his father really said, “Then I don't know shit”?
Probably.
That sounded like him.
Dangerous standard.

He wrote:
Tonight we argued about whether I liked burned chicken.
True enough.
Next:
This somehow became an argument about whether I remember my own life correctly.
Also true.
Then:
Manny remembers being present when I broke the radio. I remember him arriving later. My mother remembers the

radio in a different room. My father remembers an apartment he may not have lived in.
He stopped.
Smiled.
Then:
Everybody sounded certain.
He looked at the sentence.
Added:
So did I.

He closed the notebook.
For once, this felt like evidence.
Not of what happened.
Of what was happening now.
Maybe that was enough.

Before bed he looked at the burned piece of chicken his mother had wrapped for him and forced him to take home.
His father had eaten the burned piece.
This one was merely crispy.
Probably.
He stood in the kitchen holding it.
Took a bite.
He liked it.
This proved absolutely nothing.

Chapter 32

“Saturday”

His father called at eight-fifteen Saturday morning.
The protagonist was asleep.
He had been out Friday night.
Not terribly late.
Late enough that eight-fifteen felt criminal.
The telephone rang four times before he found it.
“Hello?”
“You sleeping?”
“No.”
His father paused.
“You sound asleep.”
“I’m awake.”
“You coming over?”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“For what?”
“The car.”
“What car?”
“My car.”
“What about it?”
“I told you.”
He had.
Something about registration.
Insurance.
A noise.
Maybe all three.
“When?”

“Tuesday.”
The protagonist searched.
Nothing.
“You didn't tell me Tuesday.”
“Yes I did.”
“No.”
“Okay.”
There it was.
He opened his eyes.
“What do you need?”
“I gotta go downtown.”
“For what?”
“Insurance.”
“Why do you have to go downtown?”
“They told me.”
“Who?”
“The insurance.”
“The insurance told you to go downtown?”
Pause.
“Yes.”
“That doesn't make sense.”
Another pause.
“You coming?”
The protagonist looked at the clock.
Eight-sixteen.
“What time?”
“Now.”
“Dad.”
“What?”
“You can't call me at eight-fifteen and say now.”
“I told you Tuesday.”
“No, you didn't.”
“Okay.”
He hated that okay.
Already.

“I'll be there in an hour.”
“Good.”
His father hung up.
No thank you.
The protagonist stared at the receiver.
Then at the ceiling.
“Good morning to you too.”
Nobody answered.
Promising start.

He showered.
Cut himself shaving.
Couldn't find one shoe.
Found it beneath the chair.
Made coffee.
Spilled some.
Changed shirts because of the coffee.
Left without eating.
Traffic was bad.
Naturally.
By the time he reached his parents' place he had developed a small portfolio of grievances, none significant enough to justify his mood individually.
Together they had formed a government.

His father was downstairs waiting.
Coat on.
Envelope in hand.
“You late.”
The protagonist looked at his watch.
“Nine-twenty.”
“You said an hour.”
“It’s an hour and five minutes.”
His father nodded.

“Late.”
The protagonist laughed once.
“Get in the car.”

His father got in.
The protagonist pulled away.
“Where are we going?”
His father gave an address.
The protagonist knew the neighborhood.
“Why?”
“I told you.”
“No, you didn't.”
“Insurance.”
“What about the insurance?”
“They need the paper.”
“What paper?”
His father held up the envelope.
“This.”
The protagonist looked at it.
“What is it?”
“Paper.”
“Jesus Christ.”
His father looked out the window.

At the next light the protagonist said:
“Let me see.”
His father handed him the envelope.
“I'm driving.”
“You asked.”
“I mean when we stop.”
They reached a red light.
The protagonist opened it.
Insurance notice.
Policy issue.
Some documentation missing.

Nothing catastrophic.
Probably solvable by mail.
Maybe telephone.
Certainly not requiring a pilgrimage across Manhattan.
He read.
“Dad, you don't have to go there.”
“They said go.”
“It says you can mail this.”
“I called.”
“And?”
“They said bring it.”
“Who?”
“The lady.”
“What lady?”
“The lady on the phone.”
“Did you get her name?”
His father looked at him.
“No.”
“Of course.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“No, say it.”
The protagonist drove.
His father stared forward.

The protagonist said:
“You should get names when you talk to people.”
“Okay.”
“And write down what they say.”
“Okay.”
“So when you call back—”
“I got it.”
“You clearly don't.”
Silence.
There.

First cut.
Small.

His father looked out the passenger window.
The protagonist felt it.
Kept driving.

Traffic stalled near the bridge.
The protagonist tapped the wheel.
His father said:
“Why you take this way?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Seriously?”
“Other way faster.”
“No, it isn't.”
“Saturday, yes.”
“No.”
“I drive it.”
“You don't drive into Manhattan every day.”
“I drove before you.”
“What does that have to do with anything?”
His father shrugged.
“Nothing.”
The protagonist exhaled hard.

“You know what drives me crazy?”
His father turned slightly.
“What?”
“You ask me for help and then argue with everything I do.”
“I said take other way.”
“Exactly.”
“That's arguing?”
“Yes.”
His father looked out the window again.
“Okay.”

“Stop saying okay like that.”
“Like what?”
“Like I'm being an asshole.”
His father looked at him.
“You said it.”
The protagonist gripped the steering wheel.

They moved ten feet.
Stopped.
A horn sounded behind them as though the protagonist personally controlled traffic.
He looked in the mirror.
“Yeah, asshole, I'll move everybody.”
His father said:
“Relax.”
That did it.
“Don't tell me to relax.”
His father looked over.
“I just said relax.”
“And I'm telling you don't.”
“Okay.”
“Jesus fucking Christ.”

They drove another block in silence.
His father adjusted the vent.
The protagonist moved it back.
“It's hot.”
“I’m cold.”
“Then close your side.”
“I did.”
“You just moved the whole thing.”
His father looked at him.
“Forget it.”
He folded his arms.
The protagonist hated the sight immediately.

A sixty-something-year-old man sitting beside his son like a scolded child.
The thought arrived.
He ignored it.

At the insurance office there was a line.
Of course.
They waited.
The protagonist stood behind his father.
His father held the envelope.
The protagonist said:
“Give it to me.”
“Why?”
“So I can explain.”
“I can explain.”
“I know, but—”
“But what?”
The protagonist stopped.
“Nothing.”
His father held the envelope tighter.

When they reached the window, the clerk asked what they needed.
His father began.
“I called Tuesday—”
The protagonist interrupted.
“He received this notice saying the policy requires additional proof of registration, and someone told him to bring it here.”
His father stopped.
The clerk looked at the protagonist.
Then at his father.
“Can I see the notice?”
His father handed it over.
The clerk read.
“This could've been mailed.”

The protagonist looked at his father.
There.
Vindication.
It felt wonderful for approximately half a second.
His father said:
“The lady told me bring.”
The clerk shrugged.
“Maybe.”
The protagonist almost smiled.
Did not.
Good.

The clerk typed something.
Asked for license.
Registration.
His father produced both.
Everything organized.
Plastic folder.
Copies.
Receipts.
The protagonist noticed.
His father had prepared.
Not perfectly.
Enough.

The clerk said:
“You're fine.”
His father nodded.
“Everything okay?”
“Yes.”
“No cancellation?”
“No.”
“Good.”
He looked relieved.
Very slightly.

The protagonist saw it.
Something in him softened.
Then the clerk said:
“You could've done this by mail.”
The protagonist looked down.
Too late.
His father already knew he'd been wrong in the specific way his son had insisted he was wrong.
There was no additional value in the fact.

Outside, his father said:
“You hungry?”
“I haven't eaten.”
“Let's eat.”
“I got stuff to do.”
His father looked at him.
“Okay.”
The protagonist heard it.
This one wasn't hostile.
That made it worse.
“What do you want?”
“Nothing.”
“Food.”
“I can eat home.”
The protagonist stood on the sidewalk.
People moved around them.
His father put the envelope back inside his coat.
The protagonist could leave.
Drive him home.
Continue day.
Reasonable.
He said:
“Let's get something.”
His father nodded.
“Okay.”

They found a diner.
Sat near the window.
His father ordered eggs.
The protagonist ordered coffee and a sandwich.
His father looked at the menu again after ordering.
He always did this.
The protagonist had noticed it as a kid and interpreted it as indecision.
Now he suspected his father liked menus.
It was possible to spend twenty-five years with someone and still discover he enjoyed menus.

His father said:
“You see Ana?”
The protagonist looked up.
“Why?”
“You mother said.”
“Of course.”
“She said Ana called.”
“That was a while ago.”
His father nodded.
“You getting back?”
“I don't know.”
“You want to?”
“I don't know.”
His father smiled.
“You know a lot.”
The protagonist laughed.
“That's rich.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”

His father drank coffee.
Too hot.

Made the same face every time.
Never waited.
The protagonist watched.
“You're going to burn yourself.”
“I like it hot.”
“You don't have to drink it immediately.”
His father took another sip.
Made the face again.
The protagonist laughed.
His father smiled.
For a few minutes the morning repaired itself.

Then his father said:
“You still writing?”
The protagonist looked at him.
“Why is everybody asking me that?”
“Who everybody?”
“Ana.”
“I'm not Ana.”
“I'm aware.”
“So?”
“Sometimes.”
“What you write?”
“Nothing you'd want to read.”
His father shrugged.
“Maybe.”
The protagonist smiled.
“You never read anything I gave you.”
“I read.”
“Which?”
His father looked at him.
“The baseball one.”
“What baseball one?”
“The thing you wrote school.”
The protagonist searched.

An essay?
Story?
Something published?
“You mean the piece in college?”
“Maybe.”
“What was it about?”
His father thought.
“A man.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Excellent.”
“Your uncle.”
The protagonist stopped.
His father continued eating.
“You read that?”
“Yes.”
“When?”
“You gave me.”
“I gave Mom.”
“She gave me.”
The protagonist stared.
“What did you think?”
His father shrugged.
“Good.”
“That’s it?”
“Good.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Very detailed review.”
“You want bad?”
“No.”
“Then good.”

Food came.
They ate.
The protagonist felt better.
Not cleansed.

Just less angry.
That should have been enough.

On the drive home his father asked him to stop at a hardware store.
“For what?”
“Pipe.”
“What pipe?”
“Sink.”
“What happened?”
“Little leak.”
The protagonist looked over.
“You have a leak?”
“Little.”
“How long?”
“Few days.”
“Why didn't you tell me?”
“I’m telling.”
“Now.”
“Yes.”
“How bad?”
“Little.”
“What does little mean?”
His father held his fingers half an inch apart.
The protagonist laughed.
“That's not how leaks are measured.”
“You asked.”

They stopped.
His father knew exactly what he needed.
Walked directly to plumbing.
Picked up a small fitting.
Tape.
Washer.
The protagonist followed.

“You sure that's right?”
His father looked at him.
“Yes.”
“Did you measure?”
“Yes.”
“You sure?”
His father stopped.
Turned.
“I've fixed a sink before.”
The protagonist immediately remembered the plumbing disaster when he was seventeen.
His father remembered too.
He could see it.
They both smiled.
“Eventually,” the protagonist said.
His father laughed.
“Fuck you.”
There.
Good.

At his parents' apartment the protagonist followed him upstairs.
“I'll help.”
“I got it.”
There it was.
Old language.
The protagonist smiled.
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
“You know last time—”
“I remember.”
His father got beneath the sink.
The protagonist stood nearby.
“Flashlight?”
“Drawer.”

He found it.
Handed it over.
His father worked.
The protagonist watched.
Too much.
His father said:
“Sit down.”
“I’m fine.”
“You making me nervous.”
“I’m not doing anything.”
“Exactly. Sit.”
The protagonist sat.

His mother came home carrying groceries.
“What are you doing?”
“Fixing.”
“What happened?”
“Little leak.”
She looked at the protagonist.
“He tell you?”
“Eventually.”
His father yelled from beneath the sink:
“I told everybody.”
His mother laughed.

The protagonist took the grocery bags.
Put things away.
He knew where almost everything went.
Not everything.
His mother moved a jar he placed wrong.
“Since when does that go there?”
“Since always.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
His mother stared.

“Burned chicken.”
The protagonist pointed.
“Don't start.”
She laughed.

His father emerged.
Turned on the water.
Dry.
He looked pleased.
Not dramatically.
The protagonist checked beneath.
“Good.”
His father looked at him.
“Good?”
The protagonist smiled.
“Good.”

His mother began cooking.
The protagonist looked at the clock.
Two-thirty.
The day he'd supposedly had things to do had mostly disappeared.
He felt irritation again.
Smaller.
Embarrassing.
He had laundry.
Shopping.
Work he had brought home.
Maybe Ana.
He hadn't called her.
There were things.
His mother said:
“You staying dinner?”
“No.”
“Why?”

“I got stuff.”
“What stuff?”
“Stuff.”
His father sat on the couch.
“Let him go.”
Something in the way he said it irritated the protagonist.
Again.
“He doesn't need permission.”
His mother looked at him.
“Nobody said.”
“He said let him go like—”
His father looked up.
“Like what?”
The protagonist stopped.
There was nowhere useful to take this.
He knew.
Then took it anyway.
“Like I'm fucking twelve.”
His father stared.
“I said let him go.”
“I know what you said.”
“Then what you talking about?”
The protagonist felt all the morning returning.
Traffic.
Insurance.
Okay.
The vent.
The line.
The lost Saturday.
The fact that none of this was his father's fault in proportion to how angry he felt.
He knew this.
Knew better.
Continued.

“Every time I come here, everything turns into a fucking project.”
His mother stopped.
His father said nothing.
The protagonist heard himself.
Still continued.
“I got my own shit to do.”
His father nodded.
“Then do it.”
The protagonist hated the nod.
“Don't do that.”
“What?”
“That martyr shit.”
Silence.
His mother's face changed.
His father remained still.
The protagonist knew he had crossed something.
There was time.
Maybe one second.
Take it back.
He did not.
His father said:
“What martyr?”
“You call me, I come over, then you act like I'm an asshole because I don't want to spend the whole fucking day running around.”
His father stared.
“I asked you drive.”
“Exactly.”
“That's all.”
“And the hardware store.”
“You came.”
“You asked.”
“I asked stop.”
“And now dinner.”

His mother said:
“I asked dinner.”
The protagonist turned.
“I know.”
Too sharp.
His mother went quiet.
There.
Second casualty.

His father stood.
“You should go.”
The protagonist laughed bitterly.
“See?”
“See what?”
“That.”
His father looked tired now.
Not angry.
Tired.
“I said go because you want go.”
The protagonist felt something ugly and childish rise.
“If you'd just handle your own shit once in a while—”
He stopped.
Too late.

His father looked at him.
The room became completely still.
His mother put down the spoon.
The protagonist could hear the television from another apartment.
Some laugh track.
Wrong room.
Wrong life.

His father said:
“I handle my shit.”

Quietly.
No anger.
The protagonist wanted the sentence back.
Not his father's.
His own.
He reached for it mentally.
Nothing.

“I didn't mean—”
His father held up a hand.
“No.”
The protagonist stopped.
His father looked at him.
“I handle my shit.”
“I know.”
“No.”
His father stepped closer.
Not threatening.
That made it worse.
“You don't know.”

The protagonist felt defensive instinct arrive.
Bills.
Insurance.
Calls.
Bank forms.
All the things his parents asked him to read now.
All the moments he had become translator for institutions that had once belonged to adults.
He could list them.
He almost did.
His father continued.
“You think because I ask you something now, I didn't do nothing before?”
The protagonist said nothing.

His father pointed vaguely around the apartment.
Not at possessions.
Everything.
“You think this came by itself?”
“No.”
“Your school?”
“No.”
“Baseball?”
“No.”
“Food?”
“I know.”
“Car?”
“I know.”
“Everything?”
“I know.”
“Stop saying you know.”
There it was.
Different voice.
Same sentence.
Ana.
Manny.
Everybody.

His father said:
“I never asked you for nothing when you were little.”
“That’s not—”
“Listen.”
The protagonist stopped.
His father had rarely said that.
Not like this.
“I didn't ask because you were a kid.”
His voice shook slightly.
Maybe anger.
Maybe something else.
“When you got older, I ask sometimes.”

The protagonist looked down.
His father said:
“If that's too much, say no.”
The protagonist looked up.
His father stared directly at him.
“But don't come help me and then make me feel like shit because I asked.”
There.
Nothing sophisticated.
Nothing left to add.

His mother looked away.
The protagonist wanted to disappear.
Instead he stood in the kitchen.
Twenty-five.
Fully formed.

“I’m sorry.”
His father nodded once.
Did not say okay.
The protagonist hated how much he wanted okay.

“I’m really sorry.”
His father sat back down.
“Okay.”
There.
The protagonist almost felt relief.
Then understood the word had been granted, not earned.
That made it smaller.
Better.
Worse.

His mother returned to cooking.
The protagonist stood there.
“Ma.”

She shook her head.
Not now.
He nodded.
Fair.

He left.
Not because anyone told him.
Because staying felt like asking them to repair what he had done.
He understood that much.

In the car he sat without starting the engine.
Five minutes.
Maybe ten.
People walked past.
A delivery truck blocked somebody.
Horn.
Dog pulling leash.
Nothing stopped.
Of course.

He wanted to go upstairs.
Apologize better.
Explain.
Tell his father he was tired.
Work had been difficult.
Ana.
The warehouse.
The notebooks.
The strange feeling of turning twenty-five and discovering life had not simplified.
Tell him he had become scared watching his parents need things.
That every request felt like evidence they were getting older.

That helping his father with insurance meant confronting a future in which the direction of care might reverse.
That irritation sometimes arrived where fear was embarrassed to appear.
All of this might even have been true.
Maybe.
He knew enough now to distrust an explanation that made cruelty emotionally impressive.
He started the car.

He drove home.
Did laundry.
The shirt from his birthday finally went in.
He watched it disappear beneath the water.
No symbolism intended.
Laundry had genuinely become necessary.

Around six the phone rang.
He hoped it was his father.
It was Ana.
“Hey.”
“Hey.”
“You sound weird.”
“Had a fight with my father.”
“What happened?”
He told her.
All of it.
Or enough.
No.
He told her all of it.
Including the sentence.
If you'd just handle your own shit once in a while.
Ana was silent.
Then:
“That was shitty.”

“Yes.”
No defense.
Good.
It did not help.

“You apologize?”
“Yes.”
“What'd he say?”
“Okay.”
“You believe him?”
“I don't know.”
Ana paused.
“What are you going to do?”
There it was.
Old question.
He sat at the kitchen table.
“I don't know.”
“Okay.”
The word felt kinder from her.

After a while she said:
“Maybe don't do anything tonight.”
He almost objected.
Why?
Because action felt better than guilt.
Because apology could become anesthesia.
He knew.
“Yeah.”

They talked a few minutes more.
David came up.
Not by name.
Ana said things were complicated.
The protagonist did not ask for details.
Not because he had achieved transcendence.

He simply had no appetite left for another person's pain.
Sometimes exhaustion produces behavior indistinguishable from maturity.
Take the win.

He slept badly.
Sunday morning he woke early.
No alarm.
Seven-thirty.
He looked at the telephone.
Did not call.
Got dressed.
Went to a bakery.
Bought bread.
Coffee.
Something sweet his father liked.
Then drove over.

His mother opened the door.
Looked at him.
Then at the bag.
“Bribe?”
“Yes.”
She stepped aside.

His father was sitting at the table with the newspaper.
Of course.
Some universes survive damage.
He looked up.
“Morning.”
“Morning.”
The protagonist put the bag down.
“Got coffee.”
“I got coffee.”
“I know.”

His father returned to the newspaper.
The protagonist sat.
Nobody spoke.

After a minute his mother put a cup in front of him.
He thanked her.
She kissed the top of his head.
Tiny.
The protagonist almost cried.
Did not.
Not because he was strong.
Because his mother would notice and the entire morning would become unbearable.

His father turned a page.
The protagonist said:
“I was an asshole yesterday.”
His father kept reading.
“Yeah.”
The protagonist smiled faintly.
“I’m sorry.”
“I heard you.”
“I know.”
His father looked over the paper.
The protagonist laughed once.
“Right.”

His father folded the newspaper.
“You gonna keep saying?”
“No.”
“Good.”
They drank coffee.

After several minutes his father said:
“You think I like asking?”

The protagonist looked at him.
“No.”
“Good.”
His father opened the newspaper again.
That was all.
The protagonist let it be all.

His mother brought out plates.
Bread.
The pastries.
His father picked the one the protagonist had bought specifically for him.
Did not say thank you.
The protagonist did not require it.
Mostly.

Later his father asked:
“You got screwdriver in your car?”
The protagonist laughed.
“What now?”
“Cabinet loose.”
His father smiled.
The protagonist shook his head.
“Yeah.”
He went downstairs.
Got the screwdriver.
Came back.
They fixed the cabinet together.
The screw had stripped.
His father held the hinge.
The protagonist drove in a slightly larger screw.
Took four minutes.
No one learned anything.

Before leaving, the protagonist stood at the door.

His father said:
“Call your mother.”
“I do.”
“More.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Okay.”
His father looked at him.
“Don't okay me.”
They both laughed.

On the drive home the protagonist thought about the previous day.
Not continuously.
Traffic required participation.
The radio played something he liked.
He turned it up.
At a red light he caught himself preparing the story.
The version he might someday tell.
The aging father.
The impatient son.
The cruel sentence.
The apology.
The pastry.
The cabinet.
Reconciliation.
A good story.
Almost too good.
He could already feel the shape trying to form.
He resisted.
Not forever.
Just then.
The light changed.
He drove.

That night he opened the notebook.

Three simple sentences had worked after Ana.
Several after the warehouse.
He tried again.
My father asked me for help.
Then:
I helped him.
Then:
I made him regret asking.
He stared.
That was harsh.
Also incomplete.
He wanted to add the traffic.
The phone call.
The insurance clerk.
His father's criticism of the route.
The whole fucking day.
Context.
Fairness.
Lighting.
Instead he wrote:
I apologized.
Then:
He let me come back.
The protagonist looked at the final sentence.
Too sentimental.
He crossed out let me.
Wrote:
I came back.
Still wrong.
His father had opened the conversation.
His mother had opened the door.
Everybody had participated.
He crossed out the entire line.

Blank space remained.

He sat looking at it.
For once he understood something without improving the sentence.
His choices mattered enormously.
He did not.
Both ideas sat together without resolving each other.
A man could wound someone in a kitchen and the universe would continue without comment.
The absence of cosmic consequence did not reduce the wound by one fucking inch.
And being ashamed of the wound did not make the man who caused it profound.
It merely meant he had noticed.
Maybe in time to do better next Saturday.
Maybe not.

He closed the notebook before the thought became prettier.
Outside, somewhere down the block, somebody was arguing.
A couple, maybe.
Words indistinct.
A door slammed.
Then quiet.
The protagonist turned off the lamp.
Tomorrow was Monday.
He had work.

Chapter 33

“Sunday”

He woke before the alarm.
This annoyed him.
There was something insulting about needing an alarm and defeating it accidentally.
He lay still.
Dark room.
Radiator ticking.
A truck somewhere outside backing up with that mechanical beep that seemed incapable of belonging to any decade and yet, somehow, did.
He looked at the clock.
6:41.
Sunday.
No work.
No reason to be awake.
Naturally.
He closed his eyes.
Opened them.
Twenty-five.
There it was again.
Still.

He had turned twenty-five months earlier.
The number had not improved with age.
If anything, it had become less impressive.

At twenty-four, twenty-five had appeared across the street carrying documents.
Now it was simply where he lived.

He got up.
Made coffee.
Opened the refrigerator.
Eggs.
Butter.
Mustard.
Actual food now.
Manny had been shamed into success.
He cracked two eggs into a pan.
One shell fragment fell in.
He removed it with his finger.
Hot.
“Fuck.”
Twenty-five.

The phone rang.
He looked at it.
Sunday morning calls belonged to family, emergencies, or people insufficiently respectful of sleep.
He answered.
“Hello?”
Manny.
“You up?”
“No.”
“Good. Come outside.”
“What?”
“I’m downstairs.”
The protagonist walked to the window.
Manny stood beside a car waving.
He looked up and gave him the finger.
The protagonist returned it.

Communication.

“What do you want?”
“Breakfast.”
“I’m making breakfast.”
“Your breakfast sucks.”
“How would you know?”
“Mustard.”
“That was months ago.”
“History matters.”
The protagonist looked at the pan.
Eggs beginning to burn.
“Fuck.”
Manny laughed through the receiver.
“Come downstairs.”

Ten minutes later he got into the car carrying toast.
Manny looked at it.
“That what you're eating?”
“Yes.”
“Sad.”
“Drive.”

“Where?”
“You're driving.”
“I mean where are we going?”
Manny shrugged.
“Bronx.”
The protagonist looked over.
“Why?”
“Because I said.”
“No.”
“Your mother gave me something.”
The protagonist closed his eyes.
“Of course she did.”

“What?”
“Nothing.”
“What'd she give you?”
“Thing for your aunt.”
“Which aunt?”
Manny stared.
“You people have too many.”
“That's not an answer.”
“Bronx aunt.”
“Excellent.”

Traffic was light.
The city looked different Sunday morning.
Not cleaner.
Just caught before performance.
Store gates down.
Delivery men.
Old men carrying newspapers.
Women walking dogs.
Kids in church clothes.
Someone washing a sidewalk that would be dirty again before lunch.
The protagonist liked the city most when it looked unfinished.
This was not a metaphor.
Probably.

Manny put a cassette into the stereo.
Freestyle.
The protagonist looked over.
Manny smiled.
“Don't.”
“I didn't say anything.”
“You made a face.”
“My face is independent.”

“Bullshit.”
The protagonist turned it up.

They crossed into the Bronx.
The protagonist watched familiar streets appear.
Some storefronts gone.
Others pretending they had always been there.
A building painted a new color.
Another with plywood.
A bodega where something else used to be.
Or maybe the bodega had always been there.
He no longer trusted this kind of certainty before breakfast.

Manny pointed.
“That's where you told Denise California.”
The protagonist looked.
“No.”
“Yes.”
“Wrong block.”
“You don't know.”
“I lived here.”
“So did I.”
“Not there.”
“Close enough.”
The protagonist laughed.
“Memory by zip code.”
“Better than your notebooks.”
Fair.

They delivered his mother's package.
His aunt made them come upstairs.
Of course.
Coffee appeared.
Bread.
Cheese.

Fruit.
A plate nobody had requested.
They stayed forty minutes.
The protagonist learned a cousin was getting married.
Another was separated.
Someone was moving.
Someone had a new job.
Someone's son had been arrested.
Someone's daughter had made honor roll.
Life, refusing editorial discipline.

His aunt asked:
“You married yet?”
“No.”
“Why?”
Manny began laughing before the protagonist answered.
His aunt looked at Manny.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
The protagonist said:
“I'm waiting until I become a good person.”
His aunt stared.
“Then you're fucked.”
Manny nearly choked.

On the stairs Manny said:
“I like her.”
“She likes you better than me.”
“Everybody does.”

They drove south.
No plan.
The package had been the plan.
Everything after belonged to weather.
Manny said:

“You wanna go hit?”
The protagonist looked over.
“What?”
“Baseball.”
“With what baseball?”
“I got gloves.”
“Why do you have gloves?”
Manny smiled.
“Because unlike you, I prepare.”

There were two old gloves in the trunk and one baseball with gray seams.
The protagonist picked it up.
“Where'd you get this?”
“I don't know.”
“You steal it?”
“Probably from you.”
They went to a park.
Not the old field.
Another one.
Fewer memories to argue over.

They stood maybe fifty feet apart.
Manny threw first.
Too high.
The protagonist caught it.
Returned.
Manny caught his.
“Still got it.”
“You never had it.”
“Fuck you.”

They threw.
Nothing hard.
Nothing impressive.

Just catch.
After ten minutes the protagonist began throwing harder.
Manny noticed.
“Relax.”
“I am relaxed.”
“You always say that before making shit competitive.”
The protagonist threw one harder.
Manny caught it against his chest.
“Ow.”
“Sorry.”
“No you're not.”
The protagonist smiled.
“Little.”

A kid nearby watched them.
Maybe twelve.
Maybe younger.
Hard to tell.
His father or uncle sat on a bench.
The kid had a glove.
No partner.
The protagonist noticed.
Kept throwing.
Then Manny nodded toward him.
“You see that?”
“Yes.”
“You gonna invite him?”
“Why me?”
“Coach.”
“I'm not a coach.”
“You coach everybody.”
“That's not the same.”
Manny smiled.
“Exactly.”

The protagonist waved the kid over.
“You wanna throw?”
The kid looked at the man on the bench.
The man nodded.
The kid jogged over.
The protagonist handed him the ball.
“Throw to him.”
He pointed at Manny.
The kid threw.
Sideways.
Manny caught.
Returned.
The kid missed.
Ball rolled.
He chased.
Came back.
Again.

The protagonist said:
“Move your feet.”
The kid threw.
Better.
“Good.”
Again.
“Don't aim.”
The kid looked confused.
The protagonist realized how stupid that sounded.
“Sorry. Aim. Just don't try so hard to aim.”
Worse.
Manny laughed.
“Excellent coaching.”
“Shut up.”

The protagonist moved beside the kid.
“Just step at him.”

Demonstrated.
“Like that.”
The kid copied.
Throw straighter.
Manny caught.
“See?”
The kid smiled.
Small.
There.

They threw for maybe twenty minutes.
The protagonist forgot to think about himself.
It was pleasant.
Temporary.

The man on the bench eventually called the kid.
“Let's go.”
The kid handed the ball back.
“Thanks.”
“Yeah.”
He started away.
The protagonist said:
“Hey.”
The kid turned.
“Keep your glove up.”
The kid nodded.
Left.
Manny looked at the protagonist.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Don't.”
“I didn't say anything.”
“You're doing the face.”
“What face?”
“The I-just-learned-something face.”

The protagonist threw the ball at him.
Manny ducked.

They sat on the bench.
The protagonist rolled the baseball between his hands.
Scuffed.
Not the baseball from the cut.
He knew that one was still in the drawer.
Unless he had moved it.
Unless this was it.
No.
Different ball.
Probably.
He laughed.
Manny looked over.
“What?”
“Nothing.”

A radio played somewhere.
Hip-hop now.
Different group nearby.
Someone arguing over a basketball foul.
A mother yelling a child's name from the sidewalk.
Cars.
Sirens far away.
Normal city noise.
Nothing arranged itself around him.
Good.

Manny lit a cigarette.
The protagonist frowned.
“You should stop.”
“Here we go.”
“I’m serious.”
“You sound like my wife.”

The protagonist looked at him.
“Your wife?”
Manny smiled.
“Got you.”
“Fuck you.”
Manny laughed.
Still unmarried.
As far as the protagonist knew.

They sat.
The protagonist said:
“You ever think about leaving?”
“New York?”
“Yeah.”
“No.”
“Never?”
“Maybe Florida when I'm old.”
“Why Florida?”
“Old people.”
“Excellent research.”
Manny took a drag.
“You?”
The protagonist looked across the field.
“I don't know.”
“California?”
They both laughed.

After a while Manny said:
“You happy?”
The protagonist stared ahead.
“No fair.”
“Why?”
“That's a stupid question.”
“Why?”
“Too big.”

Manny shrugged.
“You ask big stupid questions.”
“I know.”
“Answer.”
The protagonist thought.
Too long.
Manny said:
“Forget it.”
“No.”
The protagonist rubbed his hands together.
Cold.
“I think so.”
Manny looked at him.
“That's depressing.”
“Fuck you.”
“You needed thirty seconds for ‘I think so.’”
“It’s complicated.”
“There he is.”

The protagonist laughed.
Then:
“You?”
Manny looked at the field.
“Sometimes.”
“That's it?”
“Yeah.”
“That's better?”
“Yes.”
The protagonist nodded.
Maybe.

They drove back to Brooklyn.
At a light the protagonist saw a woman crossing who resembled Ana.
Not Ana.

He knew immediately.
Still watched until she reached the other side.
Manny noticed.
Did not say anything.
Kindness.
Or boredom.
Hard to tell.

Ana had called less often lately.
Not stopped.
Less.
David existed somewhere inside those reductions.
So did the protagonist.
So did Ana.
They had not gotten back together.
They had not entirely gone away.
There are relationships that continue after they stop being relationships because language is slower than attachment.
The protagonist disliked this sentence as soon as he thought it.
Too good.
Probably hiding something.
He let it pass without writing it down.

Manny dropped him at home.
“You coming tonight?”
“Where?”
“People's.”
“No.”
“Why?”
“Work tomorrow.”
“You're old.”
“Twenty-five.”
“Exactly.”
The protagonist got out.

Manny called through the open window.
“Seven.”
“I said no.”
“Eight.”
“Go fuck yourself.”
Manny drove away smiling.

Upstairs, the answering machine was blinking.
Two messages.
First, his mother.
“Your aunt said thank you. Call me.”
Second, Bernstein.
“Don't come in early tomorrow. Meeting moved to eleven.”
The protagonist stared at the machine.
A reprieve.
He almost called Manny.
Did not.
Maybe later.

He cleaned the apartment.
Not thoroughly.
Enough to create the appearance of someone who cleaned.
Found an old receipt under the couch.
A matchbook from a club.
A button.
Three quarters.
A piece of paper with a telephone number and no name.
He stared at the number.
Could call.
Ask.
No.
Some mysteries had earned retirement.
He threw it away.
Then took it out of the trash.
Looked again.

Threw it away again.
Twenty-five.

In the desk drawer he found the baseball from the cut.
There.
Distinct.
Dirt in the seams.
He put the one from Manny beside it.
Two baseballs.
One meaningful because he had assigned meaning.
One from this morning.
Meaning pending.
He disliked the phrase.
Closed the drawer.

His notebooks occupied the shelf above.
He pulled one out.
Not seventeen.
Later.
College.
Opened randomly.
A paragraph about success.
Very serious.
Very balanced.
Very annoying.
He read two sentences.
Closed it.

Then reopened.
The page opposite contained nothing philosophical.
A list:
Laundry.
Call Ma.
Pay phone.
Practice 4.

Ana Thursday.
Buy socks.
He smiled.
This interested him more.
A human life refusing to organize itself by theme.

He turned another page.
A sentence:
I want to become somebody I can respect.
He stared.
There it was.
Young him.
Earnest.
Dangerous.
Not wrong.
He picked up a pen.
For years the instinct would have been to answer.
Correct.
Complicate.
Maybe:
Respect is not something you arrive at.
No.
Too much.
Or:
Be careful. Respect can become another form of vanity.
Jesus Christ.
He put the pen down.
The kid could keep his sentence.

He called his mother.
She answered immediately.
“You eat?”
“Yes.”
“What?”
“Breakfast.”

“That was hours ago.”
“I ate at Auntie's.”
“What?”
“Everything.”
“Good.”
Pause.
Then:
“You see your father?”
“Yesterday.”
“He didn't say nothing.”
“About what?”
“You.”
The protagonist smiled.
“What was he supposed to say?”
“I don't know.”
There it was.
Family intelligence.
Incomplete but persistent.

His mother said:
“Come Wednesday.”
“For what?”
“Dinner.”
“I'll see.”
“No, come.”
“Okay.”
She paused.
“Okay good or okay bad?”
The protagonist laughed.
“Good.”

He called his father after.
Father answered.
“Yeah?”
“You watching the game?”

“Yes.”
“Who's winning?”
His father told him.
The protagonist sat.
They talked baseball for ten minutes.
No apology.
No return to Saturday.
No need.
At the end his father said:
“Wednesday.”
“I know.”
“Don't be late.”
“Fuck you.”
His father laughed.
“Bye.”
Click.

The apartment became quiet.
Late afternoon.
Sun coming through the window at the angle that made dust visible.
The protagonist sat at the desk.
Notebook open.
Blank page.
He considered writing about the morning.
Manny.
Bronx.
Aunt.
Baseball.
Kid.
His father.
Ana.
Twenty-five.
The danger was obvious.
Everything could be made to mean something.

He had become skilled at this.
Too skilled.

He wrote:
Sunday.
Stopped.

Then:
Went to the Bronx with Manny.
Pause.
Threw a baseball around.
Pause.
A kid joined us for a while.
That was enough.
He put down the pen.

No.
One more.
Called my parents.
He looked at the page.
Boring.
Excellent.

The telephone rang.
He answered.
Manny.
“Seven.”
The protagonist looked at the clock.
5:42.
“You're early.”
“I'm giving you notice.”
“I said no.”
“Everybody's going.”
“Who's everybody?”
Manny named people.

Some he knew.
Some he didn't.
One woman he had wanted to sleep with three years earlier.
Possibly four.
He couldn't remember.
“You coming?”
The protagonist looked around the apartment.
Notebook.
Baseballs in drawer.
Sun lowering.
Tomorrow's meeting moved to eleven.
He could go.
He could stay.
Neither choice contained destiny.
This was freeing.
And disappointing.

“Yeah.”
“Good.”
“I’ll meet you there.”
“No. I'm picking you up.”
“Why?”
“Because you'll change your mind.”
“I won't.”
“You will.”
“I won't.”
“Seven.”
Manny hung up.

The protagonist smiled.
He showered.
Changed.
Rejected one shirt.
Chose another.
Looked at himself in the mirror.

No certificate.
Still.

Before leaving he opened the desk drawer.
Not sure why.
Looked at the baseball from the cut.
The other from today.
Old telephone numbers.
Receipts.
A photograph of his parents from graduation, father's camera timing wrong, his mother's eyes half closed.
He picked up the photograph.
His father younger.
Mother younger.
Him younger.
Obviously.
He turned it over.
Nothing written.
Good.

He put it back.
Closed the drawer.
Grabbed his jacket.

At the door he realized he had forgotten his wallet.
Went back.
Found it.
Then keys.
Could not find keys.
“Jesus fucking Christ.”
Checked pocket.
Keys.
He laughed.

Downstairs, the air had sharpened.

He stood outside waiting for Manny.
No phone in his hand.
Nothing to look at except street.
People.
Cars.
Windows.
Someone walking home with groceries.
Two teenagers arguing.
A little girl skipping beside a man carrying a newspaper.
An old woman dragging a shopping cart over a crack in the sidewalk.
A cab stopping where it shouldn't.
A delivery guy shouting something he couldn't hear.
The city had no idea he was watching.

He tried to imagine the biographies.
Old habit.
The cabdriver had once studied engineering.
The woman with groceries secretly hated cooking.
The old woman had three sons who never visited.
The delivery guy was saving money to move west.
The little girl's father wasn't her father.
The teenagers were brothers.
No.
Friends.
No.
Cousins.
He smiled.
Could be anything.

A car horn sounded.
Manny.
The protagonist walked toward the car.
Then stopped.
Across the street, the little girl had dropped something.

A glove.
One mitten.
She hadn't noticed.
The man with the newspaper hadn't either.
The protagonist crossed halfway.
Traffic.
Waited.
Reached the other side.
Picked up the mitten.
“Hey.”
The man turned.
“Your kid dropped this.”
The man looked at the mitten.
Then at the little girl.
“Thank you.”
The protagonist handed it over.
The girl took it.
No smile.
No gratitude.
She put it on.
The man nodded once.
They kept walking.

The protagonist crossed back.
Manny leaned over and opened the passenger door.
“What the fuck you doing?”
“Saving civilization.”
“Get in.”
He did.

Manny pulled away.
Music already loud.
The protagonist recognized the song.
Loved it.
Had once claimed to hate it.

Maybe.
Manny shouted over the music:
“You ready?”
“For what?”
Manny looked at him.
“The fuck should I know?”
The protagonist laughed.
They drove downtown.

The narrator could stop here.
Probably should.
There are several temptations available.
We could say he finally understood that a life was not an argument.
Too neat.
We could say he learned to love himself despite knowing himself.
Dangerously close to advertising.
We could return to the boy in the Bronx and explain that every invented biography had been rehearsal for accepting the ordinary one.
Plausible.
Suspiciously plausible.
We could tell you that twenty-five meant nothing.
That would also mean something.
Annoying.

The protagonist sat beside Manny while New York passed outside.
He was still capable of cruelty.
Still vain.
Still frightened.
Still generous under conditions that sometimes flattered him and sometimes did not.
Still capable of turning intelligence into camouflage.

Still capable of seeing the camouflage.
Occasionally before speaking.
Increasingly after.
Never reliably.
He loved people badly.
Sometimes well.
He wanted to matter.
He suspected he didn't.
He was wrong about many things.
Almost certainly including some of the things written here.

Manny changed lanes without signaling.
“Asshole.”
“What?”
“Signal.”
“There was nobody.”
“I’m somebody.”
“You don't count.”
The protagonist laughed.
“That's kind of the whole thing.”
“What whole thing?”
“Nothing.”
“Good.”

They stopped at a light.
A bus crossed in front of them.
Faces in windows.
Dozens of people moving somewhere.
Each carrying a version.
Maybe several.
The protagonist watched until the bus disappeared.
He did not know them.
They did not know him.
This seemed less lonely than it once had.
Or maybe he was in a good mood.

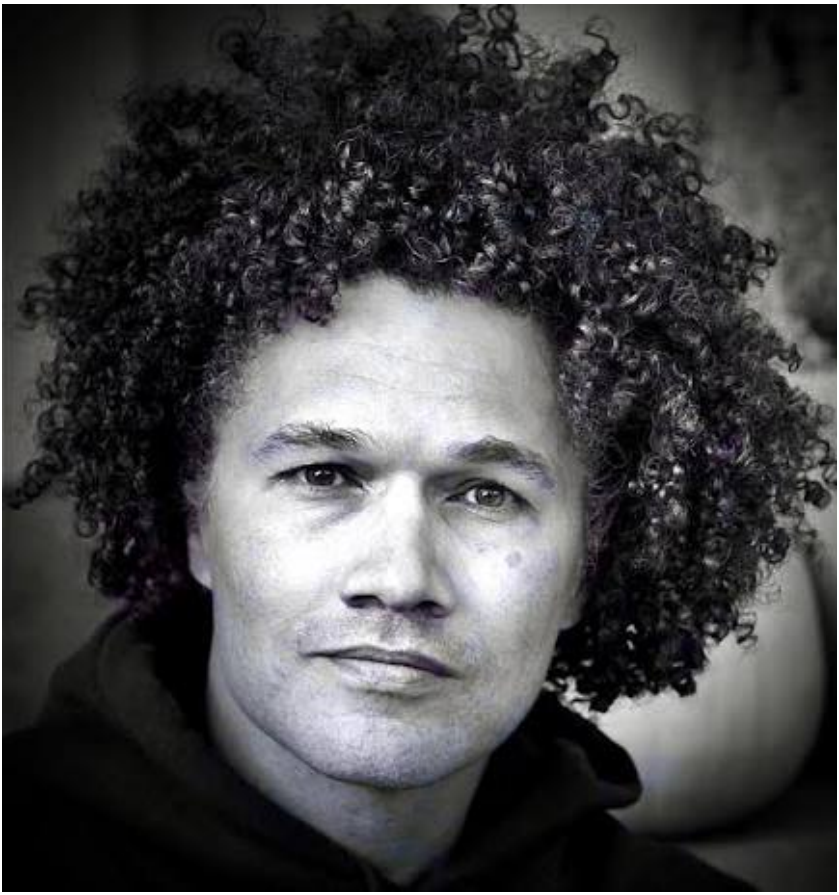
The light changed.
Manny drove.

Years later, perhaps he would remember this night.
Perhaps not.
Maybe the club would survive and the ride disappear.
Maybe Manny would insist they had gone somewhere else.
Maybe Ana would somehow enter the story despite not being there.
Maybe the mitten would become a glove.
Maybe the child would become a boy.
Maybe there had been no child.
The narrator is less certain than he used to be.
This is either progress or professional decline.

What remains is smaller.
A Sunday.
A friend.
A car.
Music too loud.
A man at twenty-five years old looking through a passenger window at a city that required nothing from his understanding.
He had spent years trying to become somebody.
The city passed.
He watched.
Then Manny said something he couldn't hear.
“What?”
Manny repeated it.
Still couldn't hear.
The protagonist turned the music down.
“What?”
Manny looked at him.
“I said, you hungry?”
The protagonist thought about it.

“Yeah.”
“Good.”
Manny turned at the next corner.

About the Author



Jose Franco is a writer, baseball coach, former small-business owner, and lifelong New Yorker whose work is less interested in providing answers than in examining why we become so attached to them.

Raised in the Bronx in a Puerto Rican and Dominican family and later making his home in Brooklyn, Franco has spent much of his life moving between worlds that do not always speak the same language: working-class neighborhoods and

college classrooms, baseball dugouts and business meetings, political arguments and family dinner tables, certainty and doubt. Those contradictions have become the raw material for his writing.

His books, available free through Stoop Juice, explore politics, economics, baseball, identity, discipline, self-deception, and the uncomfortable distance between the people we believe ourselves to be and the people revealed by our choices. He writes as an autodidact rather than an expert, borrowing freely from philosophy, lived experience, coaching, mistakes, conversations, and the occasional argument he probably should have left alone.

This book is Franco's first attempt at a novel.

That distinction matters to him. Fiction provides something his previous nonfiction could not: the freedom to create a deeply flawed human being without requiring either the character or the author to explain him away. Its unnamed protagonist can be generous and selfish, perceptive and ridiculous, compassionate and cruel—sometimes within the same afternoon.

Franco does not believe recognizing our contradictions resolves them. He suspects it merely gives us a better chance of noticing what we are doing while we are doing it.

Sometimes even that is enough.

Maybe.