

ROBERT PETTUS

ABRY.



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This book is dedicated to my wife, Mary, without whom I would be some sort of directionless, wandering ghost. Thank you for solidifying my life with continuing purpose.

CHAPTER

One



THE CHURCH

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH WAS ONE OF THE TALLEST BUILDINGS IN Abry. Constructed of old, burnt-red brick, it was the same as many other buildings in town. Out front, as with most Protestant churches, there was a sign administering free bits of wisdom. This Sunday morning, the sign read: *“WE WILL NEVER CREATE ENOUGH LAWS TO CONTROL EVIL – EVIL DOES NOT OBEY LAWS!”* A bit exclamatory, but I’m sure it created within citizens cruising by a deep sense of introspection and thought, as was

its job. The steeple of the church was shaped like a pyramid: pointed upward to the golden, blinding Kentucky sun.

The church always made me feel uncomfortable. The building itself was attractive enough; I'd even go as far as to say that it was one of the more visually appealing structures in town. The people within, however, were a bit of a different story. As with most people in all walks of life, they were varied. Some were wonderful, caring individuals who genuinely believed in the love of their God, who worked to make that love known on Earth in word and practice. Others, though, were at best ... not like that at all. Regardless, there was nothing wrong with the building itself or with the people within who inhabited it, at least not in a factual, overarching, ethical sense; they just happened to be, at least in some ways, on the wrong end of this story. From the purely relative standpoint of its narrator, that is.

This church wasn't the only one in town. There were a couple more Protestant churches and a few Catholic ones, too. A select few of these, however, were where most of the alleged heavy hitters in town resided. This church, though small, was one of them. It was the type of place that presented itself as humble; as an example of how to avoid spiritual, communal, and political pretension and self-righteousness. Meanwhile, it also was indirectly pointing a figurative accusatory finger at other local religious establishments. I don't think that necessarily made this specific church unique in any sort of positive or negative sense; it was not. I also don't think that it means that churches themselves are unique in any positive or negative sense. They may or may not be, but that isn't a conclusion to which I've yet come close to arriving at. People are people. In any case, positive, negative, or neutral, this was the church where I was destined to spend a sizable chunk of my childhood and adolescence. It is also the place where this story begins.

It was a typical Sunday morning. My family and I were riding down the sloping hill of Walnut Street on the way to church. The geography of Abry

is interesting because the town's main street (called Main Street) is flanked on its northern and southern sides by large gravitational hills leading downward to the town's central locus. These hills continue throughout the entirety of the major stretch of Main Street, and they each have names. There are seven primary hills in total, making Abry a sort of poor (very poor) man's Rome, Constantinople, or Moscow. The hill we drove down that morning is called Walnut Hill because of the walnut trees that noticeably grow there.

As we were driving down this rural imperial hill, my mother leaned back from the passenger seat and give me an inquisitive side-eye:

"How come you didn't go to youth group this morning? I know you like hearing what Jasper has to say."

"I overslept," I said.

It was true. It was also true that I liked hearing what Jasper had to say, though we (by "we," I mean the adolescent members of the church) never called him Jasper. To us, his name was Razorbeard. This was because one of my friends, Sam, had once accidentally grazed his forearm against Razorbeard's beard, causing a rash to form. Razorbeard was an interesting person to listen to as far as youth ministers go. He wasn't *only* the youth minister, though – he preached to the adult congregation as well. I guess they couldn't afford to pay two preachers or something, so they got Razorbeard to do both jobs. He must have been preaching his ass off. He was interesting, though, and a nice guy.

Recently, he'd been delivering a series of youth lessons on common non-Christian worldviews and the ways in which those worldviews are illogical and immoral. Though I wasn't religious, I enjoyed the lessons well enough because Beard was never preachy about it. He just told us the facts as he understood them, gave his opinion and advice for us, and that was it. I learned quite a bit there. I didn't make it to youth group that morning,

though. Not because I'd been into an all-night adventure or anything like that; I just didn't make it.

We continued rolling down the hill toward Main Street, where the church was. My dad, who always kept the truck in neutral when traveling downhill because he thought it saved gas, had his arm dangling freely out the window. There came a point as you were driving down the hill when the steeple of the church was nearly at eye level, as if you were staring directly at the top of it. As we hit this point in our descent, I noticed a large group of pigeons sitting on the roof of the church. They were always sitting there socially, probably shitting on the people as they walked into the building.

Here is the church, here is the steeple, and here are the pigeons, shitting on all the people.

That made me cackle aloud. My dad turned from the driver's seat and gave me a funny look.

"You laughing at my music?" he said.

My dad liked to listen to *Atomic Dog* by George Clinton whenever he felt like getting pumped up. He always listened to it before basketball games and other sporting events. Why he was listening to it before church, I had no idea.

"No," I responded, "though this song is pretty laugh-worthy. I just thought of something funny from the other day."

"Oh," said my dad as he turned the bass up as high as it would go.

We pulled into our parking spot around the backside of the church and walked up the teetering wooden steps inside. The back portion of the inside of the church was lined by a hallway with classrooms on both sides of the wall. On any given Sunday, from one of those classrooms, you could hear Mrs. Mudd playing piano and singing popular Christian children's songs like *Deep and Wide* or *Go Tell It on the Mountain* with the children of the church. It was a comfortable, inviting way to enter the building. We walked by this weekly ritual and, after passing the bathroom (where I'd likely go

simply to kill time during the inevitable boredom of the church service), we took a right and headed into the sanctuary.

The sanctuary of the Abry Presbyterian Church was in many ways prototypical and classic as it compares to other Protestant churches of similar size. It was shaped a bit triangularly, with the entrance and the back end of the pews facing the pulpit at the front, decreasing in width and growing ever narrower the closer each aisle descended to the pulpit. This is commonplace not only in churches but also in most small-scale amphitheaters. This church, however, did have a few features that set it apart visually from other Protestant theater spaces of comparable size.

The carpet was dark maroon, which I've always found to be a bit of an odd color around which to theme a sanctuary. Each wooden pew was cushioned with this same color. On either side of the pulpit were dark-green, large-leafed decorative plants wrapped in a silver metallic foil. Stained-glass windows lined both sides of the sanctuary, paying homage, in the form of memorial notes written in a fancy font, to Abrian ancestors who helped construct and create the church building and body. In front of the pulpit, which was elevated as to stand above the rest of the congregation, was an assortment of golden cups and plates used for tithing and communion. These cups, certainly, were not actually made of gold, but when I was growing up, I never cared to learn the difference, so they may as well have been. The combination of these colors and items, to me, always signified intimidation and wealth more so than calm or spirituality, but to each his own.

My family and I walked down the sloping aisle to our pew. We didn't go to church every week, which I think my parents felt a bit of shame about, as if they were doing a disservice to us (their kids) and to the community. Regardless of whether we were present or not, though, our pew was always saved for us. My grandmother was in the choir, which was situated on an elevated back row behind the pulpit. The golden pipes of a massive organ

stood looming behind the choir. My grandmother, sitting in her fold-out, maroon-cushioned chair, made cheerful eye-contact with us. Once we sat down, many of the other churchgoers started talking to us.

Mr. Mudd, the husband of Mrs. Mudd, sat in the row in front of us. He always turned around to say hello. He gave me a firm and vigorous handshake and asked how I was doing. Mr. Mudd was, by my estimation at the time, quite old. I remember that he'd fought in some major war. I think it was Korea. He was missing half of his right thumb because he'd gotten it blasted off.

"Hello!" He said. "How are you doing today, Mr. Edward?"

He always called me "Mr. Edward," which I didn't really understand, but I didn't mind it. I saw Mr. Mudd as a wise individual. The type of wise that really understands people in their group-sense. He may not have been the most psychologically intelligent person, in the sense of the individual, but he really understood how to read the collective emotion of groups of people. He was a moral person, as far as I'm concerned, and I think he had a high opinion of humanity in general – that's a pretty rare personality trait. So if he wanted to refer to me as a "Mr.," then I was okay with it.

I said I was fine, shook his hand, and, exhibiting my classic avoidance of lengthy small talk, sat down, looking away. Unfortunately for me, this didn't mean that I was free from the prattle. Razorbeard walked up to say hello.

"How's the Marsh family?" He said in a cheerful yet robotic sort of way.

I don't mean this in a negative sense, this is actually something I, to at least some extent, always respected about Beard. No one ever *really* wants to talk to people with whom they're not directly interested or invested. It's difficult, awkward, and it often seems pointless. On top of this, if you go out of your way to try and show that you "genuinely" care (which is most of the time from the perspective of the person with whom you're having small

talk clearly untrue), you just seem fake (which you are). That's why I respected the way Razorbeard went about small talk. It was obvious that he wasn't comfortable, but he still went out of his way to see how everyone was doing. And it wasn't in the typical entrepreneurial sense of fakeness; at least I don't think it was. He was willingly placing himself in an uncomfortable situation because he legitimately believed that it was important to see how people were doing. That's a quality I can respect.

Anyway, the conversation was brief. He greeted everyone and then talked with my dad about a few standard, casual topics of choice. Fishing and the UK (University of Kentucky) basketball team, I think. I don't even think Beard liked fishing, and I *know* that he didn't like UK. He was a Louisville fan, which, though maybe forgivable in the eyes of God, was most certainly *not* forgivable in the eyes of most Abrian citizens.

After he'd finished talking with us, he turned around and took his place in the wooden – predictably maroon – large preacher's chair behind the pulpit. Once the organist finished the prelude, he stood up and greeted the congregation:

“Good morning! Good morning! It's already October, but it still feels like summer! I'm already feeling a little sweaty up here! It's good to see everyone this morning. Sully, it's good to see you and the Marsh family here today. I know the 'Cats play early, so I'll try and get us out of here on time!”

Razorbeard always made jokes directed at my dad during his sermon. He also always called him “Sully” (my dad's name is Sullivan), which I'm sure Dad didn't prefer; getting called out like that in public never made him feel comfortable. He'd always give a bit of an embarrassed chuckle as his cheeks reddened. I'm not sure why Beard did that. Maybe it's because my dad is a friendly person and Beard didn't have many people outside of his family with whom he considered himself close. I'm not sure that that's what it was, though. I think maybe he was a little nervous about delivering the

sermon, and singling out someone like my dad as the butt of a harmless joke may have helped ease himself into it. It's odd, because by that point in time he'd been a preacher for over a decade, so you'd think that he'd have been completely comfortable speaking in public. I guess that even monotonous tasks can still deliver a bit of a sense of anxiety, though, especially when it's something like public speaking. Either way, my dad put up with the jokes politely. I'll bet that Beard didn't like it whenever our family didn't make it to church, though – which was often. He'd probably, in a state of nervous anxiety, periodically look up at the clock before the church service was scheduled to start, thinking something like:

“I've still got about three minutes before I need to start the service. Maybe the Marshes will show up by then. The service is always more difficult to start without an easy casual joke made at Sully's expense.”

Who knows. I do shit like that all the time.

CHAPTER

Two



THE WICKED TENANTS

“TODAY’S SERMON,” BEARD BEGAN, “IS ABOUT CORRUPTION. Corruption, as I understand it, and as I’m sure most of you do as well, is the act of being willfully dishonest, and assuredly immoral, as a means of personal gain. There are different types of corruption. Some of the most common and most discussed forms manifest within organizations such as the government or even religious groups. Though I want to talk about those types to some extent, I mostly want to look at this topic through the lens of

personal, spiritual corruption; the type of corruption that inevitably develops within people when they are dishonest with themselves. This corruption arises from, and happens in conjunction with, more common forms of organizational corruption, but this type of inner corruption is more ... it's much more dangerous, because it poisons the soul and breeds within it a sense of evil. This is especially lethal because, very often, people who allow this sort of corruption into their soul are unaware of it, and go along viewing themselves as moral, upstanding individuals. This false belief allows for the continued cultivation of spiritual corruption. We're going to examine this type of corruption through Luke Chapter 20, so please open your Bibles to the New Testament."

Razorbeard still looked uncomfortable standing at the pulpit. He was wobbling back and forth as if doing an awkward, uncoordinated dance. Each of his arms were gripping tightly the edges of the podium. I could tell, from my distance of about twenty-five feet away, that his palms were sweating. I thought that maybe this sermon was going to be more interesting than the average lengthy preaching session. Maybe I wouldn't have to make a "trip to the bathroom."

"This corruption," Beard continued, "is well exemplified in Luke, when Jesus exposes corruption within the church through the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. One day, Jesus was teaching in the temple, as he often did, when his authority was challenged by the Pharisees. After having his authority questioned, he went on to tell a story about a farmer and the tenants he had hired to tend to his land. This farmer, while he was away in another country, employed a collection of caretakers to manage his vineyard. This vineyard, we can only gather, was substantially prosperous. While he was away, the farmer sent people to check up on his crop and see how the tenants were doing. Each time this happened, the tenants beat up the visitor and threw him out of the vineyard. After several visitors had tried and failed to get any information from the tenants, the farmer decided

to send his son to check on the vineyard, thinking that the tenants would surely have respect for him. Well, they did not. They beat the son so badly that they killed him. They then threw his body out of the vineyard, thinking they would take the wealth of the place for themselves.”

“Now, based on the context surrounding this parable, it may seem that Jesus saw God the Father as representing the farmer and himself as representing the son of the farmer who was killed. We, as sinners, represent the greedy tenants. This could certainly be true. However, there are many other ways this parable can be interpreted which delve deeper into human nature itself, and which also delve deeper into the nature of spiritual corruption.”

“I had a friend back in college who, though he was a nice guy, it seemed like he was telling lies all the time, even in situations when most people would consider it unnecessary to lie; sometimes even in situations in which lying would have a negative effect. Regardless of the situation or the ramifications of doing it, he would lie. This happened so frequently and for so long, that – at least I’m pretty sure – he started actually believing the lies he told. You couldn’t convince him that he was lying because he was always convinced that he was being truthful. He lied so much and for so long that he began to lie even subconsciously, habitually to himself. This, as I’m sure you all can imagine, would often place him in some precarious situations in which lots of people would be unhappy, confused, or even simply bewildered by the things he would do or say. Maybe you all know someone like that. I think that most of us probably do. I also think that, to some degree or another, all of us are a bit like that. It’s our nature as people. Life, therefore, can often be characterized as a constant struggle to be honest with oneself. This is where spiritual corruption is born, and it’s an internal battle that the Pharisees at this temple where Jesus was teaching were likely losing.

“These priests didn’t even know they were corrupt, lying, selfish individuals. They saw themselves as educated, accomplished, respectable people who genuinely tried their best to spread the teachings of God through their own word and deed. They were so consumed by their own idea of themselves that they were incapable of seeing the truth, even when the truth they were missing was literally the physical embodiment of God. That’s not to say that these priests were uniquely pretentious or self-righteous; they weren’t. It’s *terrifying* that they weren’t, and it’s supposed to be terrifying. That’s the message of this passage. We as people, in our natural form, are corrupt, selfish beings. So corrupt and so selfish that we are very often completely, blissfully unaware of our own corruption. We like to think of ourselves as good people, and it’s very difficult to convince us, or to make us see the many ways that we are, in fact, not. But as Jesus said at the end of his parable: ‘The stone that the builders rejected will become the cornerstone.’”

Razorbeard stepped back for a moment, as if he were finished speaking. I think he even thought that he was finished speaking. He’d said all that he had planned to say. Whether he knew it or not, however, he wasn’t finished. He stepped back and stared pathetically out at the congregation, which was shuffling in the pews in collective culturally constructed discomfort. This wasn’t how a good church service was supposed to go; people weren’t supposed to bare their souls. People were supposed to dress nicely, engage in small talk, sing some songs, and then go home.

Beard continued his vacant gaze. It was as if he were having some sort of internal struggle with himself; as if he were struggling to keep up appearances and to perform his social duty while also fighting back an intense urge to unleash a torrent of continued discourse that, though likely to offend many people, was something he really felt he needed to say; maybe even felt was something he was *destined* to say – a message God was expecting him to deliver. After continuing this internal intermission for

a length of time that became noticeably uncomfortable for each of the fine folks seated in the sanctuary, he lost his battle. He could no longer hold back.

“It’s impossible to avoid conceitedness ...” he began, and paused for yet another anxious second.

“Nobody likes to think of themselves as stupid. And I mean that! Absolutely nobody. To consider oneself unintelligent is to give up on one’s dream, and, for the most part, to give up on life. Nobody likes to think of themselves as stupid, regardless of whether they are or not.”

“Do you know what that means?” he continued.

“Obviously, clearly, not everyone is an intelligent person, not even close. This means that we live in a world where everyone is convinced that they are special in such a way that they feel justified in treating other people poorly as long as it serves their own personal interests. They feel fine with it! Because in their mind, the person they’ve harmed is *less* than them. Stupid. The person they’ve harmed isn’t as smart, isn’t as attractive or successful, isn’t *destined* to be the person on top, at least not in the same way that they are. They know it. They’ve seen themselves in all the stories; all the movies.”

Beard was clearly shaken up. It was as if he were involuntarily relinquishing something that had been on his mind for a long time.

“We’re all like those Pharisees. We all think much too highly of ourselves. And the kicker is ... Do you know what the most maddening, most mind-loosening, frustrating part of it all is? It’s that we *can’t afford* to be any other way. We have to be dishonest, self-serving people simply to ensure our own survival and the survival of our families. This is the paradox of our existence, and it’s this problem, this battle that we must fight every day. We *must* discover ways to avoid becoming pretentious Pharisees.”

Razorbeard stepped away from the podium and sat back down in his regal, maroon-cushioned chair. The organ abruptly blared and the congregation rose to sing the closing hymn (*It is Well with My Soul*).

Everything was back in order. Life was continuing as it always had.

As we were walking out of the church and heading back to my dad's beat-up old Dodge truck, I overheard a conversation between Mr. Lyman and Mr. Montgomery, two heavy-hitters in town who liked to think they ran just about everything, including the church. Everyone, in their mind, to some degree answered to them.

"I don't know why Jasper is so liable to get on his damned soapbox and get all emotional and what have you. I want a traditionally structured church, you know? I like to read the Bible, sing a few hymns, and go home. I don't need nobody breathin' down my neck."

I'm not sure Mr. Lyman understood how the phrase "to breathe down my one's neck" is appropriately used, but I got the gist.

"Oh, hell-*fire*, Lyman!" said Mr. Montgomery. "It's okay if Jasper wants to get some things off his chest every once in a blue moon. He's an emotional man. He's got a lot of feelings, you know; a lot of heavy shit on his mind! These types of things really bother him. You can't expect him to just be some level-headed, plain-spoken man all the time."

Mr. Montgomery said all of this covered with a sarcastic, quivering, jester-like grin. He pulled a thin cigar from his jacket pocket, lighting it and puffing smoke skyward as he continued: "I'm not saying whether he's right or wrong, and lord knows I don't agree with everything he says, but he's a good man. He keeps to himself for the most part, so if he wants to give a bit of a ... what do you call it? ... a moral lecture, I guess you could say, then, well, that's fine by me!"

"I guess you're right, it just gets to my nerves sometimes is all," Mr. Lyman said.

“Hey, I can understand that,” continued Mr. Montgomery. “Say, we playing golf this afternoon? Forgot to ask about it earlier this week.”

Mr. Lyman gave him a bit of a comedic look: “Does the pope shit it in the woods? It’s Sunday! What the hell else we gonna’ do?”

“Just making sure. I’ll see your grouchy old ass in a couple hours. Bring some singles for betting, I could use an extra eighteen dollars; might take the wife and Connie out to dinner this evening.”

“Aw yeah?” said Mr. Lyman. “Where you gonna go?”

“Hell,” said Mr. Montgomery, “Probably Los Mariachis. Get myself a fat, salty margarita on the rocks to keep my buzz riding after I whip your ass on the course.”

“Hell!” concluded Mr. Lyman, chuckling as he turned toward his vehicle.

They got in their trucks and drove off. We got in my dad’s truck and did the same. As we pulled out of the parking lot, I reflected on Beard’s sermon. I wasn’t sure what I thought about what he had said, nor was I sure whether it served a real purpose or if it was just the result of Beard realizing mid-service that he preached in front of a bunch of shitty people. If he was the shepherd of the flock, his flock was fucked, which meant he was a shitty shepherd. Maybe he realized that.

Regardless, I hoped he felt better after having gotten whatever that was off his chest. He wasn’t a bad person, at least in the sense that he didn’t actively go out of his way to harm people or make them feel bad. But I guess if that were the only criteria for goodness or badness, then not all that many people would be bad, and I know that’s not the case.

Razorbeard seemed to know it, too.

CHAPTER

Three



WAYSTATION PARK

LATER THAT EVENING, I WENT RIDING AROUND TOWN WITH PERCY Huck. Percy was my closest friend. We got along because we were interested in the same type of stuff and because neither of us ever took anything too seriously. We liked being lazy; we enjoyed laughing at formality. It was always much easier and less stressful to treat everything as if it were a joke, Percy and I had found, so that's what we did – made a joke out of everything, regardless of whether it was something that should've

been laughed about. Everyone else in town took everything too seriously, anyway. The world needed people like us. People who didn't give a shit about much of anything. That's what we told ourselves, at least.

We were riding in his old khaki-brown 1990 Volvo — an old car by that point, in 2007, but one Percy had specifically selected. We cruised in that car just about every evening. I didn't have a car yet, but to me that didn't matter because Percy and I spent most of our free time together, and he was more than willing to drive us around wherever we wanted to go.

The Volv, as we had cleverly christened it, wasn't the flashiest car cruising the streets of Abry, but it definitely had the most personality. At least we thought it did. Percy covered the rear bumper with stickers of many of our favorite bands at that time, mostly punk and classic rock groups. There was a Clash sticker. Ramones. Beatles. Queen. Dylan. Operation Ivy. Zeppelin. Misfits. Pink Floyd. Dead Kennedys. Smashing Pumpkins. Black Sabbath. That's that type of stuff that we were into. We'd turn the volume up as loud as it would go every day as we pulled out of the Abry High School parking lot. The volume, when it was turned to max, sounded scratchy and offensive to the ears because the only speakers we had were a couple of old, towering white Hewlett Packard computer speakers from the nineties. For some reason, it never occurred to us to invest in some semi-decent speakers, so I just stole the two of them from my parent's desktop. They never used the speakers, anyway. I don't think they did, at least. Plus, the scratchy sound created by the speakers matched well with the punk music we listened to. As we pulled away from school and drove down the hill toward Main Street each day after school, I'd crank open the manual sunroof, stand up in my seat, let the wind blow through my long hair (which my parents hated), and smoke an L&M red. For me, that was the life.

That evening, we were driving around aimlessly killing time. We'd driven up to Cemetery Hill (another one of the seven hills) and sat in the car

listening to music as we smoked cigarettes. That was one of the best places in town to sit and listen to music. It overlooked most of the rest of town and provided a scenic view of the downtown area and the county courthouse, which locals were especially proud of because it was the oldest still-in-use courthouse in the state (erected in 1816). Abraham Lincoln's parents got married at that courthouse; nearly every Abrian citizen felt intense pride at that fact, as if it confirmed the specialty – it affirmed the existence – of the town itself.

As we drove down from Cemetery Hill, Percy, wearing his infamous Wal-Mart T-shirt featuring an image of the state of Utah and reading "Utah ... but I'm taller," glanced over at me from the driver's seat:

"You wanna' stop by the park? I think a bunch of people are meeting up there tonight."

There were always a bunch of people meeting at the park. I didn't normally like meeting up with people from school. I had plenty of good friends, certainly, but I wasn't one for socializing too much. Small talk was never my thing. Regardless, I looked back at Percy and replied with a simple "sounds good."

The parking lot was filled to capacity. We pulled in and met up with Jack Luther. Jack hung around me and Percy a lot. He was a lot higher than us on the Abry High social ladder, though, so he did his own thing quite a bit as well. He never excluded us from anything, though, at least not overtly or intentionally. He just sometimes did things that he knew we would have little to no interest in doing. He also had a girlfriend, Caroline Winfield, who he spent a lot of his time with.

Jack and Caroline were talking with Connie Montgomery and Levi Wagner. Connie was the daughter of Mr. Montgomery from church. She hadn't attended church that morning, though. She rarely went to church. I don't blame her, considering most of the time church consisted primarily of shifting feelings of either intense boredom or anxious discomfort. Connie

and Levi were dating, and you could tell they considered themselves an intelligent yet rebellious couple. They wanted people to feel that way about them. I'm not sure either of those adjectives necessarily fit them well, though (the intelligent part *definitely* didn't fit Levi), but they seemed to pull it off. People bought it, for the most part. I'm pretty sure they did, at least.

The four of them were standing around the playground. As Percy and I strolled up to them, Levi, likely stoned, was laying belly-down on a swing set, holding onto a nearby pole, flailing around, screaming:

“AHHHHH! TORNAAAAAADO! TORNAAADOOOO!”

I burst out laughing loudly. I was a bit upset with myself, because I generally found Levi to be an annoying individual, and I didn't want to visibly give him any credit, but something about that just got me.

Levi mostly hung around with a lot of the same people as me and Percy, which means that he also wasn't particularly high on the Abry High social ladder. Connie was, without a doubt, infatuated with him though – for some reason – so he'd managed to gain a bit of credibility around school because of that.

“Hey there, *boyyshh!*” Jack yelled as he saw me and Percy approaching.

Jack liked to purposefully exaggerate the pronunciation of certain words so that he'd sound more Southern than he actually was.

I'm sure he was excited that we'd showed up, because talking to Levi Wagner can be incredibly exhausting. It was exhausting for me, which I'm sure meant that it was even more exhausting for Jack, who had to hang out with him all the time, since Caroline and Connie were best friends. Levi was always wanting to prove something to the people around him. He wanted to make them laugh, to make them think he was smart, and to make them believe that he was someone who just didn't give a shit about anything. That he was totally apathetic. He was like that even when he was talking to me, and no one at school gave a single fuck about me, so I'm sure

he was even worse when he was talking to Jack, who was much more popular.

I took a seat on the swing next to Levi. He was still twirling around on his belly trying to get my attention. I was really struggling to avoid another laughing fit. As I tried unsuccessfully to avoid watching him out of my peripheral vision, I couldn't help but be reminded of the tornado scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. Percy and I had recently watched that movie muted, but combined with the music of *The Dark Side of the Moon*. You can sync the two of them up, and they actually go well together. At least we thought they did. You probably need to be a really spacy individual for it to work, though. Luckily, Percy and I both fit that bill. During the tornado scene, in which *Great Gig in the Sky* is playing, Dorothy is frantically trying to get to safety while fence posts and parts of the barn uproot around her. Toto has been taken away from her. It's a bit ironic, because she had just spoken with someone (who turns out to be Oz) who seems to be a fortune teller. Right after Dorothy seemingly has her future laid plainly before her, everything turns to complete and utter chaos. Total shit. Complete disorientation. That's life.

I imagined Levi in a similar situation. Tornadoes weren't entirely uncommon in central Kentucky, anyway. It was possible. One could suddenly descend swirling and rip up the fencing of the outfield of the adjacent baseball field, then make its way to our swingset. Levi, previously pretending to be sucked up by a tornado, would then be legitimately inhaled, along with the baseball fencing, up into the clouds. He would still be making a joke out of it all on his way up. He'd be yelling "*TORNADO!*" in both a sarcastic sense and a frantic, horrified sense. He'd be wearing an expression of confused terror, as if the utter incomprehensibility of the situation had prevented him from fully believing in the truth of its reality. It'd be a good way for him to go. I'd like to imagine that Percy and I would make it back to the Volv and have enough time to blare out something good

over the HP speakers before we were sucked up. Maybe some Misfits (*Hybrid Moments*, perhaps). We'd sit atop the opened sunroof and smoke L&M Reds as we spiraled into the infinite sky.

"Hey, Marsh! *HEY!*"

I snapped back into reality. Levi was staring at me, still in his tornado pose.

"*TORNAAAAADO!*" he said once more.

I feigned a laugh. I can't deny that his charade was hilarious at first, and it obviously made me think quite a bit, but at this point it had become stale.

Percy and Jack were talking about the upcoming football game later that week. Jack had played football for a year when he was a freshman, but that was it. He did a lot of things and then quickly lost interest in them. He played football for a year, was in the marching band the year after that (he wanted to learn to play the drums like John Bonham), and had played baseball for the previous two years. He was good at baseball; he cranked several homers.

We attended most of the football games, but we weren't interested in the success or failure of the team. The high school, and its football field, were only a couple blocks from my house, and I actually enjoyed going. It gave Abry a bit of a sense of weekend social ritual. It gave it some culture. People gathered, collectively excited about something. I liked that.

"What are we going to do for the game?" Percy said to Jack as I daydreamed about tornados.

"You know it's against Bardstown, right?" replied Jack. "They're going to destroy us."

They would most definitely destroy us. Bardstown was one of the best teams in central Kentucky, and Abry was, though respectable, not anywhere near the same level. Abry, however, was led by a crew of very ambitious coaches. Each of them had previously played Division 1 football and had also been associated with the coaching staff at the University of Kentucky.

They wanted to win, and they expected to win. I'm not sure why, because UK hardly ever won, either, but whatever. Some of them were decent people, as far as I could tell, but they took high school football way too seriously, and it rubbed off on many of their players. Most of the Abry High football players seemed to think they played for the nearby Cincinnati Bengals. They were dicks.

"Let's at least go. It may be a good time," came the conclusive response from Caroline. She was sitting on the teeter-totter; Connie was on the other end. They bounced up and down, listening to Percy and Jack bitch about the game.

She was right; it wouldn't be a bad time. And it's not like there was anything else to do, anyway. Not really, at least. There was very rarely anything exciting going on in Abry. High school football was about as good as it got, unfortunately.

CHAPTER

Four



CAROLINE

CAROLINE HAD GONE TO SCHOOL WITH PERCY, JACK, AND ME SINCE elementary school. We all went to Thomas Merton Catholic Elementary School, as had Connie Montgomery. In Abry, whether Protestant or Catholic, it was common to send your kids to Thomas Merton because everyone thought that school provided the best education in town. So even though Connie and I were both brought up in the Presbyterian church, we still went to school there.

Caroline came from a wealthy family. Her father was a tobacco farmer who exported most of his crop to some other country. Japan, I think. They were well off. Unfortunately, he was also an extremely abusive alcoholic. Percy was always close friends with Caroline, so sometimes, throughout the years, I'd go over to her house with him. Oftentimes, her dad would be stumbling around the house, screaming at her or her brothers. Sometimes her brothers would get physical with him. It was uncomfortable. I liked Caroline, though. She knew how to connect with me and Percy. We'd ride the narrow back roads of the countryside, listen to music, and explore.

There was an abandoned cemetery near her house that was thought to be haunted. It was out in the middle of nowhere. At the entrance was an old wrought-iron gate. It was always closed. We stopped there one night. I can't remember exactly when, maybe about a year before Connie and Levi started dating. We sat atop the Volv, smoking our L&M's and searching for ghosts.

I remember Caroline leaning backward atop the Volv, slithering headfirst down the back windshield as she informed us of the cemetery's dark past:

"You know, there used to be a church back there," she said. "It burned down, but no one knows why. That's why this whole place is haunted. All the ghosts of the people who were trapped inside when it burned are floating around here, probably moaning and shaking the trees and shit."

"No shit!" responded Percy. "Let's climb this old gate and go check it out!"

Percy hopped off his seat at the hood of the car and strolled leisurely to the fence. Caroline laughed, jumped down from the top of the car, and joined him. I wasn't much for ghost hunting, but at that point I didn't feel I had much of a choice.

The gate was locked, so unfortunately we had to climb it, which, considering it was almost ten feet tall and tipped with rusty, pointed edges,

wasn't an easy task. Thankfully, I was a naturally acrobatic individual. My dad always called me Mowgli, like the kid from *The Jungle Book*. I hopped the fence with ease. Caroline also scaled the fence and jumped down to the soft, damp ground, landing like a gymnast. Percy, on the other hand, didn't make it so easily. As soon as I got to the bottom, I turned and looked up to see him falling to the ground, his backpack (which he always kept with him) snagged on the top of the fence. Percy crashed hard. Thankfully, the damp ground was spongy, so he wasn't hurt. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Fuck you, Ed," said Percy.

After he got up and we retrieved his backpack from the top of the fence, we began exploring the cemetery.

Each of the headstones was covered in moss, and most of them weren't fully intact. Though there weren't any visible remains of a church, there was a barren, square-shaped spot where you could imagine - if there had been a church there - it would have been located. It looked like an ancient archaeological site. Percy pulled out the headlamp flashlight he always kept in his backpack, and we began looking at the headstones. Most of them had been there for quite a long time. Many of them dated back to the 1800s, and the most recent ones were from the 1940s.

As I walked around looking at the headstones and keeping my eyes open for ghosts, I noticed something that was at first interesting and then a bit unnerving. There was a glow stick lying on the ground. A *still-lit* glow stick. That meant that someone had been here. Maybe it meant that someone was *still* here. I called over to Percy:

"Hey! Do you know how long glow sticks normally last?"

He looked up from the headstone he was examining: "Like ten or twelve hours, I think, why?"

Fearful nervousness crept through my body. Considering that it only got dark two hours ago, and that people usually didn't light glow sticks unless it was dark outside, that meant that someone had most likely been here *within*

the last two hours. They may even still be here. This cemetery was far, far out into the country, so it's unlikely that anyone who drove all the way out here would just turn around and leave. I showed the glow stick to Percy and Caroline.

"Holy shit," Caroline said.

She turned around as if looking for someone hiding behind a headstone. Percy picked up the glow stick.

"These things are pretty cool, you, know?"

He wasn't fazed by the situation.

I suggested that we should get back to the Volv. Percy called me a wimp, but Caroline agreed with me, so he relented and we started heading back.

We got back to the gate and noticed that it was open. Wide open. It was gently swaying in the wind, creaking and clanking against the backside of the fence. We stood there staring at it. Percy turned around quickly as if expecting to see something. There was nothing. Eventually, we stepped forward and walked back to the Volv.

When we got there, Percy began examining the car. We had left the sunroof open. There could very easily be someone hiding, someone *lurking* in the car. Percy took off his headlamp and, holding it with both hands, frantically shaking it back and forth, scoured the car from the outside. We opened the trunk and thought for sure that we'd find something horrifying inside. We saw nothing.

"Okay ... well ... let's get the ever-living *fuck* out of this place," Percy finally said.

As we pulled out of the cemetery and began driving down the narrow, winding back road, we noticed headlights behind our car. Those headlights followed us all the way into town, the high beams cutting through the fog, shifting up and down as our stalker bounced around the old road. They finally turned away once we reached Main Street, just a block away from

the turn that led back to my house. It was the strangest, eeriest thing. Nothing ever came out of that experience, though. Just a few shivers down the spine.

That was the thing that made Percy, Caroline, and I a good crew, though. We each had a sense of adventure combined with a bit of a delusional, anxious, fantastic side, so we could turn activities that - though maybe dull for most people - into something exciting, something anticipatory. I liked Caroline for that reason. I was glad that she and Percy were such good friends, and that she and Jack were dating. They were good for each other. At least it seemed to me like they were.

CHAPTER

Five



ABRY HIGH

ABRY HIGH SCHOOL WAS CENTRALLY LOCATED IN TOWN, ONLY A couple of blocks north of Main Street, and only a few west of my house. It rested at the top of one of the seven hills: Lincoln Hill (named for the president), from where it looked down upon Main Street and the central business district. You could even see the old courthouse from the parking lot.

Behind the school, though still on top of Lincoln Hill, sat the football field. It was typical as far as high school football fields go, though the seating capacity was a little smaller than average. The field was lined on either side by fifteen to twenty rows of steel backless bleachers. They looked just like the steel backless bleachers at every high school football field in America. It was like they'd been shipped right out of the steel backless bleacher factory. I never minded the bleachers, though, and from a purely aesthetic perspective, I liked the way they looked. There was something classic and comforting about them. Ironic, considering they always made your ass feel cold and itchy. That was always a bummer. It was never a major problem, though, because I never invested myself too thoroughly in the football games. Most of the time I preferred walking around behind the home bleachers, where a combination of the nerdier and more off-beat Abry High students congregated to smoke cigarettes, stand around awkwardly, and bully one another. There was one especially strange kid who liked to walk around menacingly as he threatened to beat people with branches he'd torn off nearby trees. He'd rip one down and hold it like a two-handed longsword as he marched threateningly at anyone who came into what he considered his domain (an arbitrary grassy area). No one took him seriously though; it was purely comedic for everyone other than him. I never actually saw him make contact with anyone while swinging his tree branch. Everyone just liked the adrenaline of rushing into his territory and then running out before his weird ass could catch them. Kids are bizarre.

On top of the bleachers, on the home side of the field, there was a white building housing the radio-broadcast team. All the football games were broadcast on the radio by Howie Garfield, who was a bit of a local celebrity. He'd been calling the games, in both football and basketball, for what seemed like forever, and he had quite a talent for doing it. Many people would come to the games wearing their radio headphones so they could watch the game live and also listen to Howie call the game on the radio.

Howie was getting old, though. He'd been doing the broadcast for more than forty years, and this particular year, which was my senior year of high school, was allegedly going to be his last. The white broadcast building at the football field had already been named after him. *Howard Garfield Broadcast Building* was written in bright red paint at the top of the building, with his famous catch phrase "*Drive Safely, My Fellow Abrians!*" written in a fanciful font below. It wasn't an especially unique, creative, or even memorable phrase with which to be recognized, but the Abry High teams weren't exactly known for being successful, so it wasn't often that he could close the broadcast with a comment about a win by the team, so I guess it was good that he at least gave everyone a sound piece of advice.

Most high school football fields across the country are encircled by a track. The Abry football field, however, was not. I don't think the government had enough money to afford it, or something like that. The track team instead practiced by running laps around the parking lot. Sometimes, when it was too rainy to practice outside, you could even see them doing hurdles they'd set up in the middle of the school hallway. Wouldn't exactly call it safe, but it was certainly cost-effective.

The school itself was constructed of chalky red brick, as were many other buildings in town. It wasn't a tall building, and it wasn't particularly wide, either. It was, however, quite long. The inside of the school consisted essentially of two long hallways (on separate floors, one on top of the other) with classrooms lining both sides. At the end of the first-floor hallway was the office, with the gymnasium adjacent to it. The gym, like the rest of the school, was aged. Alternating red and blue plastic bleachers, which elevated about twenty rows up on both sides, lined the floor. In the middle of the basketball court was an image of the school mascot: the Abry High Blue Heron. Though it was a unique mascot, it likely wasn't one which invoked any sense of fear or intimidation in the minds of opposing schools. The image at half court was about as threatening as you could possibly imagine

a blue heron to look, though. It was huge, and was brandishing, oddly enough, razor-sharp teeth. It was in the process of ripping a fish (a blue-gill, maybe) to bony shreds. The fish looked kind of zombie-like, with its eyes bulging out of its sockets and everything. I'd never seen a heron with teeth; they'd always seemed like calm and majestic animals to me (even though they sometimes made a really bizarre noise), but I liked the halfcourt artwork. It was one of my favorite things, at least visually speaking, about the school.

The Monday morning following Beard's inspired, frantic sermon, and Levi's tornado spinning at the park, was as typical as any Monday morning could possibly be. I walked into the gymnasium, which was where all the students sat before class started, and climbed the bleachers to the very top, taking a seat next to Percy, Sam Rowan, Eliot Florence, Brooks Jones, and Nathan Keaton. They were the group of guys Percy and I usually hung around with when we weren't hanging out with Jack Luther and whoever he was with. We always sat at the very top of the bleachers because we thought that from up there, we were secluded enough from everyone and everything else that we could talk loudly and do whatever we wanted. We were almost always wrong about that, and we were regularly chastised (or "bitched-out," as Sam would say) by the teachers and administration.

A few minutes after I sat down, Sam looked over to me, speaking over the white noise created by the morning conversation in the gym:

"What'd you think about that sermon the other day, Ed? That dude is fucking losing it, huh!"

"Yeah, man, I dunno," I responded. "I think maybe he's just tired of all the bullshit that goes along with dealing with some of those old bastards all the time, what do you think?"

"Probably! I know that would drive me completely fucking *nuts*! Just think, you've gotta' play out this act ... you've gotta' put up this façade of righteousness, and while you do it, you've even gotta' pretend like *all* of us

other fuckers are righteous, too! As if anyone really gives a shit! That's the worst part: Deep down, ol' Beard knows that no one, including himself, *really* gives a shit. It's gotta be emotionally and psychologically draining to keep up that act all the time, especially when you've got dudes like Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Lyman just flaunting their wealth and heathenism in front of everyone all the time. But ya know what? Those guys, Montgomery and Lyman, they pay the bills. So if you're Razorbeard, you can't bite the hand that feeds you, ya know what I mean?"

I did know what he meant, but I wasn't the biggest fan of these early morning socio-cultural debates. Sam was always like that, though, and overall, it was something I liked about him. He was always sarcastic, and he was one of those people that thought the more he said "fuck," the cooler he became, but there was also a lot of substance to the things he said, which in Abry was a rare quality. He really thought about things.

"Are you all seriously talking about church right now?" Percy said as he inserted himself into the conversation.

"Listen to this, Perseus!" Sam said to Percy.

Sam often called Percy "Perseus" even though that wasn't his name. It was in reference to the Greek mythological hero, and he always made some reference to ancient Greece after he said it. I'm not sure whether Percy liked it or not. If he didn't, he did a good job of not showing it. Percy was like that. He was a bit of a tough nut to crack. If there was something about himself that he didn't want you to know, or didn't feel comfortable putting on display, it was very difficult to get it out of him. I think that particular part of his personality was created by his family situation. His parents, though both fine people, were distant individuals. They liked putting up this front of being high class. It was important to them. They were good people, though. I guess Percy thought that he needed to be seen as high class and respectable, too, so he sometimes would hide things from everyone that he thought might not fit in with the narrative he'd drawn up for himself. A

narrative aligned with that classy vision. We all had our own stuff to work on, though. Percy much less so than many of the rest of us.

“What’s that?” said Percy in response to Sam.

(He always said, “What’s that?” instead of “What’s up?” or “I didn’t hear you” or some other more common phrase.)

“So, we’re at church yesterday,” Sam continued, “and Razorbeard goes off on this rant about how everyone is corrupt and we’re all a buncha shitheads and whatnot, and then he just freezes and stops! It was like he’d seen Medusa or something! We could’ve used you there to save his ass! He just froze. He was all shook up! Kinda like some of the teachers get when we give ‘em too much hell during class. Then he just snapped out of it and started ranting again! It was the weirdest thing, dude.”

“Yeah, so what?” replied Percy. “He’s probably tired of dealing with your all’s bullshit all the time. He’s up there every week trying to get you bastards into Heaven and ... clearly ... he’s not seeing any results! I’d probably freeze up, too!”

“Very true,” said Sam. “That’s kinda what Ed and I were saying.”

The bell signifying the start of first period rang, as it did every day at exactly 8:20. My first class was Law and Justice, an elective I was lucky enough to have with Sam, Eliot Florence, and Nathan Keaton. Levi was in the class, too, unfortunately. Our teacher, Mr. Tucker, was an easy-going guy. He was knowledgeable and interested in the subject, but he never cared too much about actually teaching. He wasn’t very passionate about it. I couldn’t blame him, though. Everyone always acted like teachers may as well be working fast-food based on how little money they made. Mr. Tucker had probably burned out.

We walked into class and sat in our spots in the back of the room, near the large window facing the parking lot. The classroom was garden variety other than the back wall, which was lined with tall wooden closets. I’m not sure what they were supposed to be used for; maybe for hanging coats or

something. No one ever did that, though. From the inside of them, however, you could climb into the ceiling above the classroom. Sam liked to hide up there when Mr. Tucker wasn't looking and then, after some time had elapsed, begin sticking his arm down through removable panels of the ceiling and making ghost noises. It wasn't that funny, but it always disrupted class for a few minutes, which was nice.

"Hello class. Hope you all had a wonderful weekend. Hope you got into some ... uh ... fun stuff, and things of that nature."

Mr. Tucker always said "things of that nature." It sounded a little creepy sometimes, but I don't think he meant anything by it. He rolled his shoulders back and forth as he said it; he looked a bit like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, with his short, stocky build and poor posture. Maybe that's why people thought he was creepy. After school, my friends and I would mimic him and say "things of that nature" as we smoked cigarettes up on Cemetery Hill. We didn't mean anything rude by it or anything. I don't think we did, at least.

"We're going to start our research project today," he continued. "I want you all to think of an event from world history in which you think justice was *truly* served. Now, I know that we've discussed justice at quite some length in this class, and I also know that we've discussed some of the many instances throughout history in which justice probably wasn't served, at least to the degree that maybe it should have been, so to depart from the cynicism a bit, I want you to find an example of a time when justice really was served."

"Justice is served every morning when I take a big fat shit!" said Levi Wagner, strolling into class late.

He was wearing double popped collared polo shirts. Levi was the type of person that couldn't just wear one popped collared shirt; that wasn't quite douchey enough for him, so he wore *two* polo shirts, one on top of the other, with both collars popped. It was as ridiculous looking as it sounds.

Mr. Tucker gave an uncomfortable grin and began, as was his nervous habit, rolling his shoulders back and forth.

“Now, now, Levi. Let’s try and be respectful today. Not everyone appreciates that type of humor. It makes some people uncomfortable and ... uh ... things of that nature, you know? So let’s try and tone it down.”

“You got it, Mr. T!” responded Levi.

“So, as I was saying,” continued Mr. Tucker, “the event you choose can be any event you want, as long as you genuinely believe it was an example of a time when justice was truly served. I’d like you to warn you, however, to avoid choosing an example that you know may be offensive to your classmates. Don’t be *that* person. Once you’ve selected your event or topic, let me know so that I can confirm or deny my thoughts about its validity as a topic for this project. Please let me know, at the latest, by Friday. We’re now going to spend about fifteen or twenty minutes brainstorming ideas for this project. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Mr. Tucker then sat down in his office chair and snapped open the morning paper, as he loved to do. I’m not even sure whether he read it or not. I think maybe he just used it as a shield with which to separate himself from the class, as if to avoid the never-lessening terror known as high school students.

“What’re you going to do?” said Nathan Keaton, looking over at me.

Nathan, or Nate, as we called him, was a bit of a nervous, antsy individual. He was nice, social, and a likable person. He came from an incredibly strict family, however, and he was constantly trying to avoid doing something they would disapprove of. He was even physically antsy, always twitching, scratching himself, and looking over his shoulder as if his parents may barge into the room and start berating him at any moment. He had a strange habit of grabbing the semi-long, curly hair on the side of his head, near his ears, and pulling it as if to straighten it out. He’d do that all day long. He was a nice guy, though, and he was genuine. I liked him.

“I don’t know yet,” I responded. “I mean, c’mon, dude, Mr. Tucker just gave us the assignment like thirty seconds ago.”

“I know, I just thought I’d ask in case you had any good ideas. I’m thinking I may do mine on the Nazis. Hitler really got what he deserved, huh! He had it coming. Or maybe I’ll do it on Judas Iscariot, from the Bible. He ratted out Jesus, you know! And he got what he deserved because of that. He even did it to himself, you know; he killed himself! At least he may have. Did you know that the Bible gives two different accounts of his death? In one, he hangs himself, and in the other, he uses the money he got from betraying Jesus to buy a field, and when he walks into that field, he bursts into flame! All his intestines and organs and stuff fall out! It’s crazy! That’s kind of deep, huh? Because you know that both accounts have to be true since they’re both in the Bible. Maybe he wised up and decided suicide was his only option. Maybe he thought Jesus would forgive him if he did it that way. ... Do you think that’s a good topic? I’m not sure.”

“I’m not sure either, man.” I responded. “I think that both of those topics would work well enough for Mr. Tucker, so you may as well go tell him if you’ve decided on one of them.”

“I think I’ll go with the Nazis,” decided Nate. “That’ll be an easy one.”

He got up and rushed off to tell Mr. Tucker about his wonderful project idea. I zoned out and stared out the window. I began wondering about what Nate had been saying about Judas Iscariot. Did he really get what he deserved? In that example, was justice truly served? Judas had served Jesus for his entire life, and he made one mistake and caved in the face of the possibility of making some money. So what? Everyone does that. Maybe Jesus should have forgiven him. Maybe he even did. Regardless, what can’t be argued is the fact that, based on the Christian religious tradition, those allegedly sinful actions committed by Judas undeniably set in motion the events which absolutely *had* to happen; events that would save humanity from sin. What Judas did was something that someone was unavoidably

going to have to do, and it was something that saved the world. With that in mind, is it even possible to consider it an immoral act? Was justice truly served? At that point, I realized that I had my topic. It may not have been *exactly* the type of topic that Mr. Tucker had assigned, but it was something I really wanted to write about, so I was going to do it anyway. I wasn't departing from my cynicism anytime soon, anyway.

CHAPTER

Six



CAPTAIN CASUAL

LUNCH WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE DAY. THERE WAS SUCH an intense, rabid degree of excitement built up over it that pre-lunch-period teachers were forced to end class five minutes early every day simply because students were getting too ravenous. Most school days were somehow both mentally exhausting and completely boring, though, so it was no wonder students rushed to the relative excitement of a public-school lunch. All mental energy, by lunchtime, had been depleted just trying to

safely navigate the school hallways without either running into the wrong classmate or getting bitched out by a teacher having a bad day. Plus, teenagers are always hungry! Now that I think about it, most students who *didn't* work up an appetite by lunch were the type that were not to be trusted. They were fucking psychotic, lying to both themselves and their stomachs.

Before the lunch period, we were in Miss Ruby's biology class. In the minutes preceding the bell, we all piled as close to the door as possible, packed in like frantic commuters on the rush-hour subway. This happened not only in Miss Ruby's class, but in all classes at Abry High. It was a teacher discipline thing; none of them had any control over the situation. The cherished lunch period was only thirty minutes long, and it took *at least* fifteen of those precious minutes to get food. That meant that if you were super quick and managed to place yourself toward the front of the lunch line, you could have a solid, manageable fifteen minutes to eat. Today was taco day, which made the jockey for positions within the line at the front of the classroom door even more heated. Miss Ruby, like every other teacher at Abry High, would feign an attempt to get everyone to act like civilized individuals, but it never worked. Those tacos were too damn important.

"Hey, Miss Ruby!" came a shout from the crowd.

Nolan Jones was in the front of the lunch line getting pushed against the door; his stomach was crammed against the door and his neck was twisted backward so that he could see her. He looked like some sort of giant, twisted caterpillar standing upright. Maybe a caterpillar doing a Schwarzenegger body-building flex.

"Are bugs animals?" he continued. "Ed here is telling me that bugs are animals, but they're not, right? Animals are deer or ... uh ... dogs. Stuff like that!"

He was a fucking idiot, but he wasn't a bad guy.

“Yes, bugs are animals, Mr. Jones,” came the vexed reply from Miss Ruby. She didn’t handle idiocy well. She may have picked the wrong job.

“Really?” replied Nolan. “What about fish?”

“Uh, yes, fish are animals, too.”

“*WHAT?* I don’t think I believe you!”

My plan had worked. As Nolan was busy arguing with Miss Ruby, I slipped by him and into the front place in line. My face was now being smooshed uncomfortably against the door, but I was happy. I grinned as my jaw cracked from the pressure of the frantic crowd. I was in the best place that anyone could possibly be in. It was a good day.

When the bell rang, you had to open the door and run as quickly as you could or else you’d get trampled by the stampede. Luckily, I was experienced, so I swiftly swung open the door and bolted down the hallway. I was certain I was going to get in the lunch line close to the front. As I was running, I crashed into Brooks Jones, who was also making the mad dash to the cafeteria. He filed in behind me. As soon as he caught up with me, he balled his hand into a fist, poked out the bone of his middle finger triangularly, and “frogged” me right in the arm. Getting frogged, in case you don’t know, is when someone punches you with their middle finger exposed from their fist so that upon contact your muscle jumps out of your arm. It hurts pretty fucking good. Brooks was a big fan of frogging people in the arm. He was also constantly threatening to start frogging people in the neck. I dreaded the day when that would happen. I thought he might collapse my windpipe and kill me. Brooks was a strong, aggressive dude.

“What’s up, Ed?” said Brooks.

“Uh, not much, man. Just trying to score some of these *GAWD*-damn tacos.”

Brooks laughed if you exaggerated vulgarities. He thought it was fucking hilarious. And though I’m sure you’re thinking that Brooks was

some bully, he really wasn't. He wasn't, at least, in the classic sense of being a bully. He was more complicated than that archetype.

Brooks hung out with our group of friends most of the time. He was a bit of a dick, as I'm sure you can tell, but he was also in many ways a useful guy to have around. He was funny, in his own violent way, and he was incredibly athletic. He was also, in some ways, fearless – at least in the sense of being fearless about doing *stuff*. He'd never admit it, but *people* scared him shitless; especially authority figures. But if it was something that didn't involve dealing with any important people, or at least didn't involve dealing with people who could directly punish him, he'd do just about anything. I liked him, I guess, but I hated getting frogged. That was the consequence of running the fastest to lunch, though – you got stuck in line with the other person who ran the fastest.

I snagged my tacos – with an extra, of course – and went to sit at the table where my friends and I sat every day. Being as hungry as I was, I dove into my tacos with reckless abandon, pecking away like a famished pigeon. I even forgot to put hot sauce on them, which means that I was intensely hungry, because I never forgot the hot sauce; eating tacos without hot sauce is a fucked-up thing to do, after all. A minute or so later, Brooks sat down next to me. I looked up from my feast.

“You get extras, too?” I asked Brooks.

“Does a dog have a dick?” he replied. “Of course I got extras! I'm a growing boy!”

As he said that, he massaged his belly as if to emphasize the growth. He wasn't fat at all, though – not even a little bit.

Brooks had a litany of phrases like “Does a dog have a dick?” Most of them were pretty funny, but considering the sheer volume of occasions in which he used them, they lost their luster. I'd heard this one probably a thousand times before this instance, so it wasn't quite as hysterical to me as it had once been. I still laughed, though. Didn't want another frogging.

Everyone at lunch was talking about the upcoming football game against Bardstown. All the players were wearing their jerseys, as were their girlfriends. Normally, football players wore their home jerseys to school and gave their away jerseys to their girlfriends. None of my friends were on the football team except Nathan Keaton. He was the kicker, I think because that was the only position his parents would allow him to play. He kicked the ball with his toe, and unlike most kickers, who wore soccer cleats for increased accuracy, Nate wore standard football cleats. The ball would make a loud *THUD* every time he kicked it. I felt bad for his toe every time I heard it. It wasn't a smooth-sounding kick at all; it sounded like a firework blasting out of a mortar. He was pretty accurate, though. He'd nailed some long field goals throughout the course of the year.

Nate eventually joined me and Brooks at the table. He was wearing his home jersey. He'd given his away jersey to his girlfriend, Celia Quinn. She was a miserable individual. She was a senior, like the rest of us, but she was older than most of the other seniors; I think because she was held back a couple of times in elementary school. Nate was, for the most part, incapable of speaking his mind or making his own decisions when he was around her. She would really let him have it if he said or did anything she thought was stupid or immature, and he was *always* doing stupid and immature shit. He couldn't help it; it was his nature. She had him totally whipped. Nate didn't have a car, so she drove him to and from school every day. He said that he loved her, but I could never see how you could love someone like that. High school kids aren't exactly known for being able to think clearly about things, though, so his mind probably fogged up whenever he thought about her, so he wasn't able to see her in the same way everyone else could. She wasn't in our lunch period. Thank God.

"Dude!" said Nate in between taco inhalations. "I'm gonna drill so many field goals this Friday! I don't feel any pressure, ya know? I'm like Captain Casual out there! Captain *flippin'* Casual!"

Nate never used any vulgarities. I think he thought if he used too many, he was going to be damned to Hell. On the rare occasions when he got drunk, though, he'd start swearing like a sailor. It was like he finally felt free, like he could use all of these wonderful swear words that were forbidden to him during his normal, everyday life. It was kind of ridiculous. Captain Casual was some sort of imaginary superhero he had invented to help calm his nerves when he felt anxious (which he did most of the time). I guess he thought Captain Casual never got nervous or stressed, so if he imagined himself as Captain Casual, he wouldn't get stressed either. He was a crazy fucker.

"You're going to need to hit a fuck ton of field goals if you all are going to have any chance," I replied.

"No way, dude! We're going to take them down! I feel it!" said Nate.

As I was busy devouring my last taco, I noticed out of the corner of my eye Coach Sherman, the football coach, walking over. He sat next to Nate and put his hand on his shoulder, massaging him awkwardly. Nate, uncomfortable and extremely ticklish, let out a strange giggle before muffling his mouth with his hand.

"Now, Nate," he began. "I'm gonna really need you to be in the right frame of mind this weekend. We're gonna need all the help we can get against Bardstown, so you need to make sure you're ready to go. We've been getting better every day, and this weekend is our chance to show it."

"Yes, sir, I'm ready," responded Nate, looking at the floor as his face turned red and sweat beaded on his forehead.

Nate became anxious and reserved around most adults. I think he thought he needed to have the utmost respect for every adult he encountered, but he knew he was naturally way too goofy and off-the-wall, so he thought he needed to tone it down and be as respectful as possible when speaking with them. So they wouldn't be offended by his personality or some shit.

“Good,” said Coach Sherman succinctly. He got up and left the table without addressing me or Brooks.

Coach Sherman was one of the more frustrating individuals at Abry High. His life revolved solely around football. He’d only ever been, at best, certifiably average at it, though. If his life were a solar system, and success on the football field was the sun at its center (maybe represented by a gigantic glowing pigskin), he’d be revolving around it at about the distance of Mars – somewhat close-*ish*, but nowhere near grasping distance. He’d just be flailing around like a dumbass, grabbing at whatever he could. That’s what he did at Abry High, too, as far as I could tell.

He acted as if non-football player students didn’t even exist. He acknowledged attractive girls and football players; that was it. He taught gym class and rarely gave anyone anything to do. He never actually taught anything. He just let the students do whatever they wanted while he met with the football players and discussed plans for the upcoming game in his office. You could tell he thought he was a coach of the highest quality, that he was destined for the NFL. He played quarterback (third string) at the University of Kentucky – I think backing up Tim Couch’s backup – where I’m assuming he spent his years on the bench learning the ins and outs of coaching. Now, it would seem, he was an expert. He even hired some of his former teammates from his UK days as assistants; together they formed a posse of shitty teachers. The football team was somewhat successful, though. The only problem was that this Friday they were playing Bardstown, which was way better than them.

CHAPTER

Seven



CUDDY

THAT WEEK AT SCHOOL PASSED BY MUCH THE SAME AS MOST OTHER weeks: hazy, gloomy, sleepy Monday morphed sneakily into hopeful, jubilant, lively Friday as if the three days in between could have been crunched into a singular, relative instant. The big football game was that Friday evening, and every Abrian citizen associated with the high school, whether student, administration, or parent, was at least a little bit excited

and anxious. As Jack, Percy, and I were heading out the gym doors toward the Volv, we ran into Levi.

“Heyyyyy there, cuddies!” he said as he approached us. “What’re you boys doing?”

“Riding up to Cemetery Hill,” replied Jack. “You wanna join?”

Jack had to be cordial with Levi because their girlfriends were best friends.

“Hell yeah!” responded Levi. “Let’s head on up there and smoke a square!”

Levi liked to say words like “cuddy” (meaning “friend” – I think) and use phrases like “smoke a square” (smoke a cigarette). It seems he thought that it made him unique. Maybe he thought that people would consider him funny, creative, and smart when they realized he used such odd language. Who knows. I guess it did give him a certain appeal that not everyone had, though, so that was something. I wasn’t excited that he was riding up to Cemetery Hill with us, though. What likely would have been an easy-going, thoughtful conversation would as a result inevitably be instead characterized by stupid jokes and noise.

We swerved out of the Abry High parking lot with the sunroof open and music blaring. Today it was *Bullet with Butterfly Wings* by the Pumpkins. By the end of the four-minute song we’d already made it to the top of Cemetery Hill. We went up there to smoke cigs, talk, and gaze out over the town. We always parked the Volv by the same plot, the grave of some dude named Mercer. I’m glad that he, whoever he was, was able to provide such an ideal stone for us to sit on and philosophize. We weren’t rude about it or anything. I don’t think we were, at least. We’d usually ask his permission before we plopped down and lit up, and we’d often ask his opinion and wonder about what he thought of the topics brought up for discussion. He probably had a unique perspective, being dead and all. He was an old dude;

he died in the 60's, so he also saw things way before our time. He was, in some ways, just as much a part of our group as anyone else.

At that gravestone, all the societal issues of Abry were bitched about and then solved. All the issues that affected us, at least. Maybe we were selfish for not trying to solve everyone else's problems, too. I don't think so, though. We had too many of our own problems to be worrying about other people's. If we did that, then we'd inevitably drown.

"Man!" said Levi, exhaling smoke into the air, "this square is hitting the *SPOT!* I've been feenin' for one since that one I chiefted in the bathroom between sixth and seventh periods!"

"No shit?" I said in my standard monosyllabic tone. "I'm glad you persevered."

"Me fucking, too, Ed, me ... fucking ... *too!* Hey, look," he said as he reached into the pockets of his jeans. "I've got these pictures I took of Connie when we were fooling around the other night."

He yanked from his pocket a handful of Polaroid photos.

"You'll enjoy these, Mr. Mercer, you creepy old fuck! You hear that, boys? If you put your ear to the ground, you can just about hear ol' Mercer jumping for joy down there in his casket! He's rattling around in that brittle wooden cage!"

Levi began flipping through the photos and showing them to us. They were of Connie, though probably not ones that she would want people outside of Levi seeing. Why she would even want Levi seeing them I couldn't figure out, but I guess that was her business.

"Look at these!" Levi continued. "I took them in my car the other night after the movie. Already spanked my jack to them like three times!"

"Dude!" Percy interjected, "I don't think Connie would like you showing these to us. You didn't show them to anyone else, did you? Why would you want to show them to us?"

"Chill out man! She's my girlfriend, anyway – not yours."

Levi continued to show us each of the photos, completely unaware that we were all creeped out by him. One of us probably should have told Levi to fuck off, sort like Percy started to do, but Jack and I both tended toward apathy in most situations. We'd much rather just get whatever bullshit we were dealing with finished without controversy rather than unnecessarily piss anyone off. Jack's brand of apathy was a bit more cynical than mine, but we were both apathetic as hell.

After we'd finished smoking our cigs and pretended to look at Levi's photos, we got back into the Volv and headed back to the school parking lot to drop Jack and Levi off at their cars. Before Levi got out of the car, he yelled "*BACON!*" and reached up from the back seat and smacked Percy hard in the back of the neck.

To "bacon" someone, in the parlance of Abry High, was to smack them in the back of the neck as hard as you could while simultaneously yelling the word. You had to actually yell "*BACON!*" or it didn't count, for some reason. Everyone thought it was hilarious; clearly Levi was a fan of doing it. It wasn't as bad as getting frogged, but it still wasn't comfortable.

After the baconing, Percy simply gazed forward with a look of slight disgust on his face. That was the best way to handle it, though. With Levi, it was best to just let him do what he was going to do so that he'd be out of your business as quickly as possible.

"See you cuddies at the game tonight!" Levi said as he jumped out of the car.

"That dude can really be a fucking douche sometimes," Percy said after Levi had removed his presence from the Volv.

"Yeah, no shit," I replied. "Sucks that you're kinda stuck hanging around him so often, Jack – because of Caroline and Connie."

"He drives me fuckin' nuts sometimes, that's for sure," said Jack. "He's not *really* that bad though. I guess it could be worse."

“You’re just saying that because he doesn’t do any dumb shit to you,” responded Percy. “He only messes with people he feels are either below him or at his same level. He wants people he perceives as above him, like you, to laugh at the stupid shit that he does and to like him. That’s why those pictures he has of Connie are so fucked up, you know? Because he was so ready to show them to us, so you know that he sees her as below him. He’s using her to bolster his own credibility ... or, like, to boost his own perception of where he thinks he sits on the Abry High social ladder. He may as well have been spanking his jack while he was showing us the photos, because that’s basically what he was doing. Just masturbating all over us! And then he’s got the nerve to slap me in the back of the neck with it!”

“Yeah, you may be right,” concluded Jack. “But if that’s the case, he’s not doing a very good job of it. I’m pretty sure everyone thinks he’s a fucking idiot. Maybe he and Connie will break up soon, then I wouldn’t have to deal with his dumb ass anymore. Anyway, I guess I’ll catch you guys at the game. See ya later.”

After Jack got out of the car, Percy and I rode around listening to music until it was time to head back for the game.

CHAPTER

Eight



MMH

THE ROLLING HILLS OF THE CENTRAL KENTUCKY KNOBS WERE QUITE A backdrop to look at while cruising around slowly in the Volv. They never got old. From the perspective of a teen yet to travel or see much of the world, the sprawling, wooded knobs looked almost mountainous; it was like a chain of small mountains cutting through the bluegrass. At the foot of each knob usually stood a field occupied by cows, corn, or tobacco. There would be a creek running through the field. Cows would be standing in the

muddy, stagnant stream, waving their tails back and forth. Other than their tails, they'd appear frozen, as if the field were littered with dozens of ultra-lifelike cow statues equipped with pendulum tails. Only when they unleashed their gong-like *MUHHHHHHHHHHH* could you be sure that they were alive. Living cuckoo clocks of the bluegrass.

Percy and I were cruising around this temporally frozen landscape killing time before the game. This place, to us, seemed as if it would never change. The cow's tails may as well have been counting a separate, subjective time incapable of true progress or change. Percy and I thought our lives were progressing in similar fashion. We thought nothing ever really changed. We were wrong, of course, but it's difficult to see very far into the future when you've only been alive for seventeen years.

The Volv didn't like to move very quickly, so we didn't roll around at breakneck speed, as was the proclivity of many of our classmates. We sputtered along happily at a moderate pace. That was something we could do for hours on end; we were content. All we needed was the Volv and some good music. When you're a teen, almost anything is a good time as long as it involves separating yourself from your parent's house. Not that I ever had anything against my parents. They were both excellent at their childrearing duties. It was just that getting away for a bit, even if "away" meant only a few miles down the road, inspired a feeling of freedom, or at least a brief remembrance of the inevitable, impending freedom that would be adulthood. It was as if I could briefly glimpse the future, and I always liked what I saw.

We rode that day from the time that we dropped off Levi and Jack in the parking lot right up until the scheduled time of the game. When we arrived back at the school, the parking lot was packed, so we had to park on the street a little farther down Lincoln Hill. We got out of the Volv and began the ascent up to the football field, which was situated at the very top of the hill.

Major events in Abry contained a lot of cultural depth. They, in many ways, were the method by which the town itself affirmed its own identity, the way in which it communicated with itself. People who all knew one another well, in an ancestral sense – their families connected generationally – showed up and began chatting, the sound of which was like a swarm of bees. The conversation rarely varied outside of the same few topics. Not that conversational depth was impossible or that it didn't happen. It just didn't regularly happen in that type of setting. Abrian people, for the most part (outside of maybe the kids who hung out behind the bleachers), wanted to talk about the same thing: the event that was currently happening, regardless of what the event was. Local events in Abry were an exciting thing, at least for Abrian people.

Percy and I walked up to the front gate, where we saw Mr. Tucker and Miss Ruby, who had taken on the weekly responsibility of managing the ticket booth. Miss Ruby, noticing us, exclaimed, "Hello, young men! I didn't think I'd see you all tonight! Do you normally come to the games? You don't strike me as the type that would come to the games."

"We do occasionally," said Percy. "Just because we're a little weird doesn't mean that we don't like to get out and about like everybody else, Miss Ruby!"

"I know, Percy! I know!" replied Miss Ruby. "I didn't mean anything bad by it! You boys know that I like you both! You're both good kids!"

Mr. Tucker agreed with her and shrugged his shoulders. "Just thought you may have better things to do, and ... things of that nature."

"Maybe sometimes we do, but I guess not tonight," I responded. "We're not the most imaginative people when it comes to thinking of stuff to do."

"Oh, be *quiet*! You are two intelligent young men! I see it all the time in class! Well, anyway ... you boys enjoy the game!" concluded Miss Ruby.

Miss Ruby was one of the best teachers at Abry High. She was inarguably both highly educated and deeply passionate about her subject.

She genuinely loved biology and cared deeply about whether or not her students absorbed what they needed to learn. She was also, as opposed to some other teachers, perceptive, social, and inherently psychological enough to understand the workings of the minds of her students. She was one of the few who could effectively communicate with high school kids. She was both social by nature and in possession of depth, which is something of a rarity with the human animal. It is, however, the trait that best creates a true understanding of people as individuals, whether those people are high school students or any other type of person one may come across in life. Miss Ruby had that, which is why most students – regardless of which micro-culture within Abry they were associated with – liked her.

Upon exiting the ticket booth, we could see on our right the concessions stand, which was permeating throughout the area the smell of mustard, relish, grilled brats, and banana croquettes. On our left were the away bleachers. Purple and gold sweaters, the colors of the Bardstown Tigers, alit the stands in what was, at least as far as the Abry Heron fans were concerned, an intimidating display of aggression. When Abry fans saw those colors in the opposing bleachers, it often meant one thing – a bad loss. This year, however, there was some optimism. The team looked fairly solid, and Abry had a new coach in Sherman. He, according to local gossip and the weekly newspaper, had trained the team in a more professional, more disciplined manner than they had ever been taught. They were a diligent, hard-hitting football team.

CHAPTER

Nine



TOE

PERCY AND I MADE OUR WAY TO THE STUDENT SECTION, WHERE WE SAT on the elevated bleachers next to Sam, Brooks, and Eliot. Not long after we sat down, the football team finally trotted from the home locker room onto the field. They progressed in lines of four or five, holding hands with one another. They looked serious. You'd think they were about to storm the beaches of Normandy rather than play a high school football game. I guess that was what Coach Sherman instructed them to do. Maybe it created

within them a sense of brotherhood. How that could be possible, though, was a bit beyond me. Half of those guys barely knew each other a year previous, and they likely wouldn't talk to each other but maybe a couple of times in the decades succeeding their football days. Maybe they were estranged brothers, though; that was a possibility. Regardless of what sort of familial relationship they shared, though, I couldn't deny the effectiveness of this propaganda tactic employed by Coach Sherman, because it undoubtedly worked. Those players marched out onto the field as if they were confidently delivering the One Ring to the fires of Mount Doom. After they reached the bench, Nate Keaton, having previously been as stone-faced as each of his teammates, boyishly ran up to us and looked up from the field.

"Hey! You ready to see me drain some threes? I'm like Ray Allen out there!"

Nate, though visibly excited, also looked nervous. For him, this type of thing, though something to which he was always looking forward, was also horrifying.

"Hell yeah, man!" Percy responded. "Get out there and uh ... kick some balls and shit!"

Nate ran off looking a little more self-confident after receiving that bit of comedic reassurance. After he turned away from us, we sat down, not long after which the game began.

It was a bloodbath. Bardstown scored three times in the first quarter, and our majestic Abry Herons were completely incapable of stopping them. Nate hit a pair of respectably lengthy field goals, though. What was unfortunate, however, was that he shanked one in the fourth quarter. At that point in the game, Bardstown was already winning by a score of 59-13. Nate came in to try and put three more points on the board, but instead of kicking it through the uprights, he sent the ball fumbling along the ground and out of bounds. When Nate got back to the sideline, Coach Sherman

started laying into him. A lot of the players gave him disapproving glares. I think maybe they were embarrassed at how badly they were getting pummeled, so they decided to take it out on the lowest player on the team totem-pole. That logic clearly didn't follow, as Nate had single-footedly scored six of the team's precious thirteen points, but I don't think the coach or the other players were capable of coming to that realization.

What's doubly unfortunate about the whole thing is that the majority of the embarrassment caused by that end-of-game disaster likely wasn't even caused by Nate. As anyone watching the game could tell, Nolan Jones, who was the placeholder, completely botched getting set up after catching the snap. I'm not sure Nate could've kicked that ball through the uprights even if he'd kicked a perfect ball. It didn't seem like anyone was aware of that, though. Nolan Jones definitely didn't seem to be aware. Either that or he was just making sure the blame was deflected from himself. That might be more likely. He was on the sideline, standing next to Coach Sherman and Nate, his arms crossed grouchily, participating in Nate's chastisement. I always liked Nolan well enough, but he was, even on his best days, entirely spineless.

Not long after that incident, the game ended, and the band, like clockwork, played the most unavoidably ironic rendition of the school fight song. The marching band and the football team weren't exactly known for being friendly toward one another, and I couldn't help but think that the band was enjoying this new version of the fight song they'd played hundreds of times previously. As this anthem played, the football team headed at a sullen limp back to their locker room. It was as if they'd prepared for this moment and were trotting synchronously with the band's music. It's hard not to believe that they at least subconsciously knew this was the outcome that everyone, including Coach Sherman, had really expected.

After the game, Percy, Sam, Eliot, Brooks, and I walked behind the bleachers, at which point Sam immediately sparked a cig, inhaled, and exhaled the smoke as he said, “Man! That was what you call an *asssssss whoopin*’!”

“Yeah,” Eliot responded. “Our guys didn’t put up much of a fight. We were way too slow for them. But whatever. Life goes on.”

Eliot was probably the most level-headed member of our group of friends. He was the type of person who could’ve been popular if he wanted to be; everyone liked him. Instead, though, he decided to hang out with us. Not in the same way that Jack hung around us. Jack only hung around me and Percy, not the rest of the group. Jack was popular in his own way, and he made it a point to hang around with other popular people. He cared a lot about his image, whether he thought he did or not. Eliot, on the other hand, didn’t give a single shit. He could have hung out with whoever he wanted, and he still chose to hang out with us. He didn’t even associate himself with anyone else. He emanated the type of greaser-like vibe that people respected, for some reason. He was tall, blond, and athletic, but he also had a tendency to wear old beat-up clothes, ride a skateboard to school, and smoke cigarettes in the bathroom between classes. He was decent to people for the most part, too. People generally thought he was cool. I did, too.

“Well, don’t get too hung up on it, there, Eliot!” Sam continued. “Don’t get all butthurt about it! Those football goons will be just fine! Hell, we all know they’ll be prancing around school next week as if nothing happened, talking about how they’re the greatest group of football players that has ever graced the turf of Kentucky high school athletics! You and I know they don’t give one singular shit-biscuit – at least not really – about whether they won that game! They all knew they were going to get their asses smacked before the ball was even kicked off! All they care about is that people at school, and teachers at school, think they’re the shit because they play

football. That way they can continue to dick around all day and spend half of their classes in the weight room not doing a *GAWD*-damn thing!”

“That’s a damn *FACT!*” said Brooks, erupting into laughter. “I haven’t heard anything truer all night!”

After this dissection of the culture-group known as the football players, there was an extended period of silence. It was the type of silence that inevitably fills the space between major events of the day. The previous conversational note – the anticipated event known as the football game – was officially over. It had run its course, both temporally and psychologically. We – whether we’d consciously realized it or not – had collectively, instantaneously come to the realization of its conclusion at essentially the same moment, whether by chance or as a result of some sort of cosmic group-think. Now it was time to figure out what was going to happen next. After some time had passed, and after Sam had finished smoking his cig, he excitedly turned to Brooks.

“Hey! I’ve got an idea!” he said. “You know that sign out in front of the weight room? The one that says something about how to be a good football player or some shit?”

“It says *PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION TODAY*,” I informed Sam. “I’m pretty sure they just ripped it off of Notre Dame, though.”

“Of course, they did!” continued Sam. “How about we go steal that bastard and put it on the roof of the weight room? It’ll piss off Coach Sherman, and it’s not like it’s hurting anyone. And plus, you know that the football players will think some Bardstown kids did it, anyway. Those dumb bastards.”

“Hell yeah!” Brooks said as he frogged Sam in the arm.

Sam recoiled, looking flustered and uncomfortable, but he was still smiling about his plan.

“I dunno,” interjected Percy. “Sounds kinda fuckin’ stupid. What are we supposed to be getting out of doing this? Are we supposed to be sticking it

to the football players or something? And even if we were, why in the hell do we feel the need to stick it to them in the first place?"

"We're not supposed to be getting anything out of doing it!" said Sam, rubbing his arm. "It's just a way to kill time and piss off Coach Sherman."

"Still sounds fuckin' stupid," concluded Percy. "I guess I'm down, though. It's better than doing nothing."

We decided to spend the next few hours riding around. Once it grew dark enough, we'd come back and take the sign.

CHAPTER

Ten



PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION

WE CRAMMED INTO THE VOLV AND CRUISED AROUND TOWN UNTIL WE stopped at the Mercer grave on Cemetery Hill and stood around idly bullshitting and listening to music. We were jamming to songs like *Holiday in Cambodia* by The Dead Kennedys, *She's Lost Control* by Joy Division, and *I'm Waiting for the Man* by Velvet Underground. Good tunes for late-night mischief.

As we killed time, Brooks stood contemplatively, arms crossed, looking to the sky as if thinking hard about the purpose of the universe (though I'm sure he wasn't). The rest of us were caught up in some pointless discussion. I doubt we even realized Brooks wasn't participating in the conversation, but after some time he spoke up.

"I dunno, guys. Percy may be right – this does seem kinda fuckin' stupid. We'll probably get caught, and when we do, we'll be in a buttload of shit with Coach and all the other teachers at school just because we wanted to put a ... to put a gawd-damn sign on a roof."

Brooks, though not always possessing the biggest sack when it came to dealing with or confronting authority, was still by far the most physically imposing member of our fellowship, so though everyone thought he was being a bit of a coward, everyone also was afraid of challenging him. After a period of frustrated silence, Percy spoke up.

"It is kinda fuckin' stupid, but I still think we should go ahead and do it. Some of the football players are good dudes, but most of them are dumber than shit. They're stuck way far up the putrid cave of their own asses even though they're not even good at the only thing they care about being good at. They need to know that, at least in some small way. They need to know not everyone respects them. And Coach Sherman *definitely* needs to know it, too. You saw him bitching out Nate, right? Nate can't handle that kind of shit, dude! And he didn't even deserve it. So let's go put that sign on the roof. Maybe it won't have any effect at all; it probably won't. But we should still do it. Plus, I already asked crusty old Mr. Mercer about it, and he's all for it. Says he'll be there with us, at least in spirit."

Percy liked to envision Mr. Mercer as one of the zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*. He seemed to think that, at any moment, under the right conditions, ol' Mercer might thrust an arm out of the ground and claw at the dirt to escape.

“Hell yeah!” Sam responded, running up and excitedly pushing Percy. “Perseus is right! Let’s do it!”

Everyone agreed. Even Brooks reluctantly admitted that he understood what Percy was saying and thought we should do it. So we crammed back into the Volv and drove back down Cemetery Hill and then up Lincoln Hill toward school.

It was a breezy, crisp fall night, which – as anyone from Kentucky will tell you – is the most perfect weather anyone can possibly experience. We had the windows down and the sunroof open. Brooks, Eliot, and Sam were in the back seat, and I was up front. The Volv was going a bit faster than its typical moderate pace, as if the car itself was a bit antsier than usual – as if it knew that something exciting was about to happen.

We pulled into the school parking lot, stopping directly in front of the weight room. Percy threw the car into park, took the keys out of the ignition, and sat silently looking at the small brick building. Everyone else joined him in silence.

The anticipation of an exciting or uncertain event is always more exciting than the event itself. The pre-game, more often than not, is more enjoyable, and in some ways more memorable, than the actual game. The football team knew it. They experienced it first-hand when they were demolished by Bardstown. Leading up to the game, the buzz around town was focused on them; they were in the limelight. Now that the game had finished, what would they do? Would they go home, lay in bed, and think about how all the excitement generated because of them was fake? Would they consider themselves fake? *Were* they fake? Is the excitement of a community justified even if the object of that excitement is not worthy of much excitement in the first place? These questions can’t be answered objectively by anyone, and perhaps they shouldn’t even be thought about too much, but the football players were inevitably being confronted with them, and in many ways, so were we. This whole idea of putting the sign on

the roof, however trivial and stupid it was, seemed more exhilarating when it was still in its planning stage. Now that it was actually happening, the frenzy was gone, replaced with nervousness and fear. At least that was the case for me.

“Welp, let’s get to it!” Sam said as he opened the door and rolled out of the back seat.

The rest of us followed suit. The *PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION TODAY* sign stood right outside the glass doors of the weight room. Sam, fearless as ever, walked up and began tugging on the sign, trying to uproot it from the ground.

“That’s not going to work, dude,” Eliot informed him. “There’s probably a big slab of concrete under the sign, so you can’t just rip it up out of the ground. You have to use a shovel.”

Eliot opened the trunk and removed a small folding military shovel. He stepped up to the sign and began digging into the soft dirt around it. Not long after he started, he hit concrete.

“Holy shit, you’re right!” exclaimed Sam. “How’d you know that?”

“Because I’m not a fucking idiot like you, Sam,” Eliot responded.

This sarcastic remark lightened up the mood a bit, as the rest of our group began helping to uproot the sign. It wasn’t long before we had completely yanked it from its place in the ground, concrete slab and all. The next question before us was how we were going to get the heavy concrete-connected sign onto the roof. The sign wasn’t *that* heavy, but lifting it onto the roof was still going to be a chore. Being that Sam and I were the smallest, we were elected to climb onto the roof and then together pull up the sign. The roof wasn’t very high off the ground, and climbing it was fairly easy. Percy simply pulled the Volv parallel to the side of the building, after which we climbed the Volv and then climbed up onto the flat, tar-and-gravel roof.

Once we had situated ourselves, the trio of Percy, Eliot, and Brooks lifted up the sign so that Sam and I could grab it from our place atop the roof. After we got a hold of it, Eliot jumped on top of the Volv, grabbed the bottom of it from there, and helped us to hoist it onto the roof. We then propped it against an air-conditioning duct. It was perfect. The sign would be clearly visible to Coach Sherman as he walked into his office in the weight room on Monday morning.

After we got the sign stably propped, Sam jumped down from the roof. I was about to follow him, but as I was preparing to jump, I saw a car pulling into the parking lot, blue lights flashing. Without any time to escape, everyone stood statue-like in the parking lot waiting for the cops. Thinking I hadn't been seen, I crept from my spot at the front of the roof to its backside and jumped off. Luckily for me, the Abry High weight room was situated right at the edge of a small grouping of trees and bushes. I fell into the foliage and bolted down the street.

At an anxious, hurried pace, I ran from the grouping of trees back out onto the street, away from the police car. After I ran for about a block, I saw St. Aloysius Catholic Church, the church associated with Thomas Merton School. That church – unlike the Presbyterian one – was always open, even late at night, and was as good of a place as any to hide from the police. I ran up to the large wooden double doors, wrenched them open, and stepped inside the familiar quiet sanctuary of my middle-school years.

The sanctuary of St. Aloysius, though in some ways similar to that of the Abry Presbyterian Church, had a much different atmosphere to it. It smelled like quiet – if that's even possible. The quiet air was thick and felt as if any unwanted word uttered within the creaking expanse of the room would immediately be swallowed up by living silence. The doors squeaked open in an eerie way, spectral way. You'd think that someone, at some point in time, would have fixed that issue. Maybe they liked it; it certainly added to the creepy vibe of the place.

Upon entering the sanctuary, visible on the right was a font of holy water. When I was in middle school, I always felt a little jealous that I wasn't supposed to use that water because I wasn't Catholic. If enough people tell you that something has magical, spiritual capabilities, and it's located in a place that seems a bit otherworldly, then it's easy – especially as an impressionable kid – to start believing in magic. I think I did that when I attended Thomas Merton School and had to go to mass at St. Aloysius twice a week. I wanted to dip my hand in the holy water, and I always felt like a huge nerd when genuflecting before entering the pews. I wished that I could do it more naturally. I wanted to legitimately believe that my genuflection meant something, but I was always on the fence. Too obviously on the fence, in fact, to believably feign any sort of real spirituality.

Unlike the Presbyterian Church, the floor in St. Aloysius was wooden; there was no maroon carpet. The pews didn't have any cushions, either; just old, creaky, brittle wood. That percussive music – my frantic, pacing steps fused with the high-pitch creaks – created within the room a perfect ambience. After entering the sanctuary, I rushed down the aisle toward the front and sat heavily in one of the pews. It groaned under even the light weight of my teenage ass. I flipped down the kneeler with my feet, kneeled, and – just like The Mamas and the Papas – pretended to pray. As I kneeled, I looked up and saw a large statue of Jesus on the cross hanging from the ceiling. I'd never before realized how lifelike that statue appeared. He looked to be truly in pain. His head, slouched over to the right, seemed to be struggling to maintain wakefulness. It made me wonder what artists, when they create those types of images, wish to evoke within the viewer. What understanding are we supposed to arrive at from looking at that type of thing? Surely we're not supposed to better understand what Jesus went through. That – based on the Christian understanding of the event – would be impossible. Was it supposed to evoke from within us a sense of regret?

That would seem to be equally fruitless, as Jesus's crucifixion – again based on the Christian understanding of things – was what was absolutely destined to happen. It was the fate of the world. Can someone, or should someone, feel regretful about something that happened if that thing that happened was not only what *had* to happen, but also the only possible thing that could have happened? It seemed unlikely to me, but I didn't exactly know much about anything. If the artists didn't create their work for either of those two reasons, though, the only reason that would remain would be something selfish. People are clearly selfish, so maybe that's what it was. Some artist just wanted to show everyone how fucking talented they were. I didn't like thinking that, though, so I decided to side with reflection and understanding.

I was probably wrong, though.

After I sat thinking in the sanctuary for about a half-hour, I got up, walked out the door, and went home. I didn't know anything about what happened to the rest of the guys. I remember being sure they were fine, though. It's pretty tough to get a teenager worried about much of anything, even when they should be.

CHAPTER

Eleven



LIFE GOES ON

THE NEXT MORNING, PERCY PULLED UP IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE TO pick me up for school. This was a huge relief, as I didn't know what had happened to anyone the night before. I opened the passenger side door of the Volv, from which erupted the blaring sound of *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* by The Beatles.

"Dude!" Percy yelled over the noise. "Fucking dude! I can't believe we got out of that!"

“What happened?” I responded as Percy began turning the volume down.

“Dude, the cops didn’t do shit! I don’t think they even noticed the sign, those blind fucks! They didn’t see you at all. They didn’t even say anything about Sam climbing down from the roof, and there’s absolutely no way in hell they didn’t see him. It was odd. Strange as hell! They just lightly bitched us out and then told us to go home. I was amazed!”

“Holy shit, that’s awesome,” I replied.

“Yeah, man. I wonder how flipped out Coach Sherman is going to be when we get to school. I bet that ol’ guy is going to lose his shiiiiittttttt.”

“I guess we’ll find out here in a few minutes, huh?” I replied as the Volv cruised up Lincoln Hill.

Coach Sherman didn’t lose his shit. Not even a little bit. In fact, nothing happened at all. The sign wasn’t even on the roof when we got to school, which meant that either the cops had taken it down or someone from the school administration (probably Coach Sherman himself) had. Either case should’ve surely resulted in some sort of response other than absolutely nothing. None of us knew how to feel about it. As we sat on the bleachers in the gym waiting for the first bell to ring, we contemplated what it could possibly mean.

“I don’t get it. I don’t get it. I don’t ... fucking ... *get it*, man,” Sam began. “I climbed my lazy ass all the way up on top of that roof, damn near had a heart attack from the physical stress of getting up there combined with the psychological stress of seeing those damn blue lights, and we get nothing for it! What the fuck!”

“Dude! I can’t believe you all did that!” chimed in Nate. “That was so dumb. You all should be happy that you didn’t get caught.”

“Shut up, Nate!” said Eliot. “The main reason we were even doing it in the first place was to get vengeance for you. We saw Coach Sherman over there on the sideline laying into you.”

“Aw, nah man,” Nate said. “I deserved that. I really botched that last field goal. What a chunker!”

“That was Nolan Jones’ fault, and you know it, man, but you can decide to believe whatever you want.”

After a few minutes of everyone expressing their bafflement regarding the whole ordeal, the first bell rang, at which point Sam, Eliot, Nate, and I sprang off the bleachers and fumbled our way to Mr. Tucker’s class.

Mr. Tucker spent most of the class sitting lazily behind his desk and reading the paper as everyone worked on their “justice was truly served” projects. Nate was really getting into his project about the Nazis, while I had been casually, sporadically trying to think about Judas Iscariot while primarily pondering the events of the previous night. I decided that it was better to just let the whole thing go, whether it made any sense or not. Nothing in life ever truly makes sense anyway, so a lot of the time it’s better just to let things unfold as they may and let it go. Considering that none of us got into any shit with the law or the school administration, this seemed to be one of those cases. After arriving at this cynical but honest conclusion, I tried with more effort to divert my attention to my project.

I wasn’t sure how to proceed with or research the project. It was in some way historical, whether in the literal sense or in the sense of the impact it undoubtedly had on Western society, but it wasn’t *strictly* historical in the sense of the traditional high school history class. I didn’t think Mr. Tucker would care too much about that, though. For one, he didn’t really seem to care much about much of anything. Perks of tenure, I guess. Currently, he was reclined in his office chair with his feet on the desk, reading the paper. The only movement I’d seen out of him was a sudden, awkward, frantic fumble in his chair that almost caused his coffee to spill from the desk. He managed to miraculously catch it in his crotch at the last minute. As a result, he stood up in an awkward position that made it look like he was trying to hump his desk. It was a hell of a save, though.

Coach Sherman should have recruited him to the football team. After that, he went straight back to his reading or sleeping, whatever he was doing behind that newspaper. Apart from his visibly clear nonchalance, though, he was a teacher who encouraged students to dive into subjects that wouldn't necessarily be considered run-of-the-mill. Though undoubtedly lazy, he could be a good teacher at times. He wouldn't mind my topic. I didn't even feel like I needed to ask him about it.

That still left the task of research, though. I needed sources other than simply reading the Bible. Though of the utmost importance to many people, the Good Book couldn't be considered a primary source of historical information. I would need something more. I decided that I probably needed to talk with Captain Razorbeard. He could both shed educated light on the subject and also point me in the direction of useful sources. Luckily for me, I was going to see him anyway that evening at our weekly youth group gathering.

The bell signifying the end of class awoke Mr. Tucker, who jerked from his reclined chair and finally succeeded in knocking his coffee off his desk. The mug shattered on the floor.

"Not again! I do this too damn much!" said a red-eyed, dazed Mr. Tucker.

Once he remembered that he was in class and realized that he had more than twenty students staring at him, he stood up with a feigned, unsuccessful look of professionalism.

"Okay, guys. Make sure you talk to me about your topic if you haven't already. Make sure that justice was served ... and ... and things of *that* nature. I'll see you all tomorrow."

He then gave his customary anxious roll of the shoulders to express his discomfort, exhaustedly fell back into his chair, and once again hid himself behind his paper.

No one confronted any of us about leaving the sign on the roof. Coach Sherman even semi-happily asked everyone how they were doing at lunch when he came to give Nate his daily game plan for the following week's matchup. It was bizarre. After school, I rode up to Cemetery Hill to smoke cigs with Percy and Jack.

CHAPTER

Twelve



NOWHERE MAN

YOUTH GROUP AT THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LED BY RAZORBEARD, was usually a good time. Many of my friends attended. Percy, Sam, Eliot, and Nate were always there. Jack even came sometimes, though not often. They came because Razorbeard was a relaxed, friendly, and intelligent person. He knew how to connect with us. He liked a lot of the same music and movies we did, and he talked about subjects that were genuinely interesting; his discussions had some depth to them. Lately, he'd been

talking about popular philosophical worldviews and why, in his opinion, they weren't as all-encompassing, as logical, or as personal as Christianity. Currently, he was going through deism and existentialism. He liked to include the lyrics to some of our favorite songs in his explanations to keep us interested. When he was discussing existentialism, for example, he examined it through Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb*. He, of course, did it with a very clear bias toward Christianity. You couldn't blame him for that, though – it was his job. He talked about how the song subject's mind was clearly, inescapably different from external, hard reality, and that the subject of the song – even though he tried so hard to create his own world, or to make the outside world more like the image of reality he saw in his mind – had all of these problems because he struggled so much to confront objective reality. Reality with a capital R. Razorbeard thought he was arguing against existentialism, but to me, it seemed like he was arguing in favor of it. It was still a good discussion, though. I liked it.

This week, he was talking about nihilism using the lyrics of *Nowhere Man* by The Beatles. Before the weekly discussion began, we congregated in the youth room and flopped down on the big comfy couches, after which we directed our attention to Beard.

"This song, *Nowhere Man*, is dangerous," Razorbeard began, "for the same reason that most other dangerous Beatles songs are dangerous: they're sung by John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison."

That wasn't a good way to get any attention or conversational respect from us, but Razordbeard had built up enough rapport with everyone, so we continued listening.

"Any average Joe listening to the song would consider the subject of the song to be a nobody, without a doubt! However, since John Lennon is singing the song, everyone assumes that he's correct, or that he has some enlightened message to deliver to the masses. They may even envision John as the alleged 'nobody' being described in the song – which is clearly

contradictory. Let's focus on some of the lyrics. Take these for example: *Doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to, isn't he a bit like you and me?*

"Don't you think there's something sad about this? Imagine that some really, truly lonely individual was singing it instead of John Lennon. What would you think about it then? Would it still contain any depth, or would it just be sad? Wouldn't you want to help this person find the truth? This is why the song is exemplary of the nihilistic worldview. Its subject seems completely ready to admit that the world is meaningless, and he has absolutely no desire to fight its perceived meaninglessness. He's given up. This is the danger of nihilism. Because not only has this person given up on himself ... no, he's not content with that. He wants to bring others down with him! He wants them to appreciate his spiritual loneliness artistically.

"Isn't he a bit like you and me?"

"With this lyric, he is trying to bring others down to his own lonesome level. He wants others to feel the sense of self-loathing he feels."

Razorbeard had become visibly emotional. This wasn't uncommon for him when he got going about something he cared about. It was like the fate of the world truly depended on whether or not he could convince us – this small group of teenagers – that he was correct. I think that was one of the more respectable parts of his personality, though. You could really tell that he cared; that he thought that, by delivering his message to us, he could save us. I wasn't really in the market for being saved, but I did appreciate the importance he placed on us. I didn't agree with his analysis of the song, though.

"I don't think I agree with you, Beard," I spoke up. "The song is definitely lonely, but based on what you've explained to us about nihilism, I don't think you could consider it truly nihilistic."

"Why's that, Ed?" Razorbeard responded.

“Because the song is about fighting loneliness. It’s about understanding that loneliness happens, being aware of that loneliness, and overcoming it so that you can see all of the worthwhile stuff in the world. The lyrics you were just talking about seem nihilistic, but you have to examine them relative to the rest of the song. Right after that line, for example, the song goes: *Nowhere man, please listen. You don’t know what you’re missin’.* *Nowhere man, the world is at your command.*

“I don’t think you can consider that nihilistic at all. Maybe you could consider it existential, since our hero the Nowhere Man is feeling encouraged to take on the world, but that would be positive, wouldn’t it? Plus, it really seems as if the narrator of this song is trying to help the Nowhere Man. He wants to help pull him out of his loneliness and see the beauty of the world.”

“That’s true,” Razorbeard replied, “but the important thing to remember here is that the focus of the song is worldly. Both the narrator of the song and its subject, the Nowhere Man, are at best looking for help in the wrong places. They need to stop looking to the world for help and to start looking up to God.”

“That’s a total cop-out!” I exclaimed. “You can’t answer every difficult question with blanket Christian responses. God can’t be the answer to everything. And I don’t even mean that in an anti-religious sense. I’m just saying that, if we’re going to have this discussion about nihilism, and we’re going to frame the discussion around this song, *Nowhere Man*, then let’s dive into it and really talk about it, you know? We can’t just conclude that this song is against God and move on, because if we do that, then what have we even examined? At that point ... you know ... we don’t even know what the hell we’re talking about anymore!”

“You’re right, Ed,” Razorbeard responded calmly. “I think my argumentative side may have gotten the better of me there. I wanted a conclusive answer to prove my point in this whole thing, and my answer

didn't correlate well with what my argument had been in the first place. Anyway, though, you all seem to be interested in these discussions, and you seem to understand what all these worldviews are, so I guess at least in that sense, I've done my job."

"You have most definitely done your job," I responded. "And you know, I've been doing a bit of research on this subject myself. I was reading some quotes from some of these philosophers the other day, and I stumbled upon this one by Nietzsche. It said: *It is by invisible hands that we are bent and tortured worst.*"

"I think it really relates to the discussion we're having about this song. People become overly anxious and lonely because they put too much pressure on themselves to be the person they think everyone else wants them to be. They instinctively – as a sort of human nature – try and make themselves into the image they think the important people in their life want to see; whether it's their parents, their teachers, or whoever else. Everyone does that. So maybe that's what this song is about – the realization of the importance of being true to yourself; of making yourself into the type of person that you actually want to be rather than the person you think that other people want you to be. I think people recognize the difficulty involved with doing this type of thing, but I don't think they realize the *depth* of the difficulty of doing it. It's not easy to understand who you are as a person. I sure as hell don't understand myself at all. But hopefully someday I will. Then the world will be at my command!"

"Jesus Christ, Ed!" Sam exclaimed. "You look into shit *wayyyyyy* too much. You'd probably understand yourself and everyone else a lot better if you just chilled out a bit. Just go with your gut, man. The people who think about stuff too much are the ones who make the wrong decisions. Do you think that anyone who has ever won the lottery has been someone who thought about the probability of winning, or thought about the ethical implications of the existence of the lottery? Fuck, no! That dude, whoever

he is, just buys the ticket, goes on with his life, and then later gets super fucking pumped when he learns he's a millionaire. Anyway, this Nowhere Man, and the narrator shit-talking him in the song, are both thinking about everything way too much. They both need to go out and buy a lottery ticket."

"Please, *please* don't use that type of profanity here, Sam," said Razorbeard. "Maybe Ed has too much awareness, but if that's the case, then he needs to give some of it to you. You know we're in a church, right?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Sorry, Beard!"

After a few more minutes of joking around, Beard dismissed the group. After everyone had left, I turned to Beard to ask about my project idea for Mr. Tucker's class.

"Hey, Beard, I have this idea for a class project I've been meaning to ask you about. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course, Ed. What's up?"

"Well, Mr. Tucker gave us the assignment of writing about a time in history where we think that justice was truly served. Instead of tackling that topic, I think I'm going to flip it upside down and write about the opposite."

"Okay. So what are you going to write about?"

"I think I'm going to focus on Judas Iscariot."

A look of concerned interest crossed Razorbeard's face.

"Look," I began, "everyone considers him a villain. Obviously, he kind of ratted out Jesus, so I can understand, from the outside, why people see him as a bad person, but think about this: by doing what he did, he set in motion the most important – at least based on the Bible – the most important singular event in the history of the world. Based on the nature of the importance of this event, and the nature of the events of Judas' life, wouldn't you think that he was predestined to do it? And if he was predestined to do it, don't you think we've got no choice but to consider him a good person? What a terrible burden! I mean, based on what I

understand about this, Judas didn't really have much of a choice in the matter. He didn't have much of a 'self' to create – it was already created for him. His essence preceded his existence, not the other way around. At least that's what it seems like to me. And if that's the case, that means that he did the job he was born to do, which would make him a good person."

"That is quite a topic!" Beard responded. "As I'm sure you're aware, this isn't a topic that I'm likely to agree with you much on. I will, however, discuss it with you as much as you'd like."

"Great!" I responded. "Can we meet next week? Is that okay?"

"Of course," said Beard.

I walked out of church that night feeling more confident than usual. I was glad that Beard had agreed to help me with my topic, and I was also energized by the discussion we'd had that evening.

I felt a little less like a Nowhere Man.

CHAPTER

Thirteen



NOTES

THE FOLLOWING DAY, SCHOOL STARTED ABOUT AS STANDARDLY AS ANY school day could possibly begin. Percy picked me up in the Volv, we drove to school, pushed open the rusted old metal door of the gym, climbed the bleachers, and sat in our normal place up top, jabbering like starving geese with everyone else about whatever was piquing our interest that day. Sam was still in disbelief about how no one said anything about the sign. Eliot was getting bored of hearing about it and had begun telling Sam to shut the

hell up. Brooks was entertaining himself by asking me random trivia questions and then frogging me in the arm when I got the wrong answer. Percy was silently listening to music. Based on the muffled noise I heard coming from within his headphones, I knew it was *Kashmir* by Zeppelin.

Mr. Tucker's class was as ordinary as ever. He pretended to deliver some half-hearted bullshit lecture for about twenty minutes and then sat down, read his paper, and let the students work on their projects. Ms. Carey's English class was equally uneventful. She was trying, and mostly failing, to generate interest in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which we'd been reading and studying in class for the past couple of weeks. Rather than pay attention, however, most students tried to secretively nap. They'd attempt to hide their closed eyelids behind their book, which they'd have propped atop their desk like a defensive wall at the most awkward of angles. This, from the teacher's vantage point, had to be obvious as hell, but the snooze rarely ended until the nameless student inevitably slipped away from the crutch provided by their elbow and snapped into startled wakefulness, at which point they'd look around to make sure no one had seen them (everyone obviously had), and then not-so-stealthily resume their snooze. The only students who maintained any sort of real interest in reading the story were me and Nate, and that was only because we continuously volunteered to read out loud and would create what we thought were ridiculous 1600s British accents. This was surely incredibly annoying to most of the other students, but we never noticed. Or maybe we just never gave a shit. Regardless, it wasn't the most exciting class in the world. Everyone was more than ready for the lunch period when it finally arrived. As we shoved into line by the door, Nate aggressively wedged himself in front of me, turned back, and in his British accent exclaimed: "*Fair is foul and foul is fair!*" He beat me to lunch that day.

Once I made it through the agonizingly long line, I sat down next to Nate and Brooks and began going to town on my tasty meal of rectangular

pizza, watery canned corn, and apple slices. Most students didn't like the school pizza, but I never had a problem with it. Considering how hungry I always was by the time the lunch period rolled around, I'd scarf down just about anything most days. I think the students who said they didn't like it were faking, anyway. If something looked low-quality, it was trendy to pretend like you didn't like it. That's what most students did. Some would even do the most bizarre thing – they would remove the cheese from the pizza, scrape off the sauce, put the cheese back on the pizza, and then eat it, as if the sauce was somehow lower quality than the rest of the pizza. It was one of the weirdest fucking things I ever saw. And it wasn't just one student! Lots of them did it. Who the hell knows why. A bunch of pizza-sauce scraping sheep. One popular student probably did it, and then next thing you knew, it was the cool thing to do. Scraping the fucking sauce off the pizza! The sauce was probably the only part of that pizza that was even a little bit real in the first place. That shit is easy to make decently and then can. The cheese, on the other hand. ... The world is a strange place. Culture is creepy. Especially high school culture.

As I was saying, lunch started off like it usually did. Brooks, Nate, and I sat down and began bullshitting about something; what it was, I can't remember. Brooks was of course being a bit of a dick, which was lame because it prevented me from crushing my pizza and corn at the rate at which I'd hoped. It was okay, though; I was used to that. After ten minutes or so, Coach Sherman walked up and pulled Nate aside. About five minutes after that, Nate came back and sat down again.

"What did that bastard want?" I said.

"First off, dude, he's not a *b-word*. Secondly, he was talking about this cool idea all of us on the football team are going to do today after school. The game against Bardstown, you know ... it was a disaster. Nobody played well. I played terribly. And everyone knows we're way better than that. We're a really good team. We could've beaten Bardstown if we really

came to play. So today after school we're going to bury the tape from that game, as a team. We're going to totally forget about it! And also, along with the tape, we're going to write our personal goals for the year – both related to football and life in general – and bury those, too. It's a really good idea! Coach always had good ideas."

"So what's your *GAWD*-damn goal?" Brooks said as he shoved the last bit of pizza into his grease-smeared mouth.

"Well, for starters, I'm not going to miss any more field goals for the rest of the year. No more chunkers like that one from the other night. On top of that, I'm going to really start working on being a good teammate to all of the guys on the team, and also a good boyfriend to Celia. She's been getting on me a lot lately, and for good reason! I can be a bit of an idiot sometimes."

"Hold on, man," I began. "That is the dumbest shit I've heard all day on multiple levels. First off, why would you bury your goals? The symbolism of burying the tape is so that you can put it behind you and forget about it, right? So if you do the same thing with your goals, aren't you just saying you're going to forget about them, too?"

"Well ... uh ... no, dude! You don't get it," replied Nate.

"And secondly!" I continued, "all of the stuff you just said is total bullshit! For one, that missed field goal against Bardstown wasn't your fault. That's just a fact. You nailed the other field goals that game, you just missed that one because Nolan Jones' dumb ass couldn't hold the ball. And the stuff with Celia is just ... I don't even know what to say about that. You know how I feel about her. She's miserable. You go out of your way to do everything for her and she's still just an ass to you all the time. So if anyone needs to work on being better, it's her, not you."

"No, dude! You just don't get it. You don't really talk to anyone other than our group of friends, so you don't understand anything about the rest of the school. This is important, and these are things I need to work on."

“Whatever, dude,” I concluded. “Just try not to let people walk all over you, man.”

Nate stared into the remaining bits of corn scattered across his plate as if he was a practitioner of divination, about to unfurl to us the future. He was visibly angry. I shouldn’t have been such a sarcastic little dick. Nate was the type of person who, like lots of other people in the world, got angry about certain things. The difference with him, though, was that he was constantly anxious about purging himself of that anger in any sort of positive way. He was anxious about releasing it in any way at all, for that matter. He hated controversy. It didn’t come naturally to him. It didn’t come naturally to me either, honestly.

After that tense discussion, the rest of the lunch period proceeded in awkward silence. Even Brooks was quiet. I saw him spontaneously, as if by habit, jerk his fist into the air to frog me – sadistic excitement momentarily flashing in his eyes – but he caught himself just in time and didn’t do it. I sat quietly, finishing my rectangular pizza and brooding about how much bullshit it was that all these people felt so comfortable taking advantage of Nate. They took advantage of him and then convinced him *he* had done something wrong! He was too nice. I was starting to agree with Sam; it was a real bummer that no one noticed the sign we put on the roof, because those bastards needed to realize that not everyone in school – and not everyone in the local community – put them on a pedestal.

After my stomach was full and my body had absorbed the nutritious, state-sanctioned sustenance of the pizza and corn, I headed to my afternoon class.

In the afternoon, I had journalism with Percy and Jack. That was one of the few good things about Abry High – the school was relatively small, so it was easy to set up your schedule so that you’d have most of your classes with your friends. Percy, Jack, and I deliberately made this plan when we signed up for journalism, which was taught by Ms. Johnson. She was quite

possibly both the most apathetic and most undisciplined teacher at Abry High. She'd given up any attempt to control her classroom a long time ago. Most days, Percy, Jack, and I would leave class and go to the computer lab under the agreement that we were going to work on the nonexistent school newspaper. Ms. Johnson knew that we never did that, she would just much rather us not be in class, and it provided her with an excuse to allow us to leave. I think, in the entire year I was in journalism class, I can only remember one time that the school newspaper, which was supposed to be published every month, was actually finished. It was the first month of the school year, I'm pretty sure. She never gave anyone any stories to work on, or any formatting or editing work to do on the paper, or really anything to do at all. As long as everyone left her alone, she was happy. Well, maybe not *happy*; she didn't seem like a very happy person at all. That was what she wanted us to do, though, so I guess maybe she was as happy as she was personally capable of being in that particular period of her life. The three of us felt the same way – we just wanted to be left alone.

That day, once we got to the computer lab, sat down, and threw on some music (*Alec Eiffel* by Pixies), Jack spoke up.

“So, I’ve got some exciting news. Connie broke up with Levi last night.”

“Holy shit, really?” replied Percy. “You fuckin’ with me?”

“Nope. Caroline told me. I’m not sure why though, probably because Levi is an annoying dick.”

“Sounds like a good enough reason to me!” said Percy. “That’s great though, seriously. Being forced to hang around him semi-often was ruining my life a little bit. He’s funny sometimes, I guess, but most of the time ... God ... it’s tough.”

“Yep, well, we don’t have to deal with that bullshit anymore,” Jack concluded.

We spent the rest of the class listening to music and aimlessly searching the web. Percy and I liked to play this game where one of us would give the other two random, unrelated words, and that person would have to use Wikipedia to get from the page associated with the first word to the page associated with the second in as few clicks as possible. Percy gave me the words *rabbit* and *guitar*, and I made it from one page to the next in a relatively speedy four clicks. I went from rabbit to mammal to human to music to guitar. Percy was impressed. We spent the rest of the period in the computer lab doing that.

After the bell rang, signaling the end of the last period, the three of us leaped out of our seats and said goodbye to the librarian, Ms. Carpenter, as we rushed out the door.

The parking lot was noticeably more chaotic than it normally was. People were rushing around, laughing, some almost hysterically, looking wide-eyed at a mass-photocopied collection of pictures everyone was passing around. Not long after we walked outside, Sam skipped up to us with a photo in his hand.

“Jesus *fuck!* Look at this shit!” He handed me the photo. It was one of the pictures of Connie that Levi had showed us on Cemetery Hill. Jack immediately snatched it from my hand.

“Where the hell did you get this, Sam?” Jack demanded, instinctively gripping Sam’s shoulders as a look of shocked discomfort spread across Sam’s face.

“They’re everywhere!” Sam exclaimed. “Either that picture or a handful of others. They’ve all been mass-copied and put on the windshield of every fucking car in the lot. It had to have been Levi, right? Apparently they broke up last night, and that bastard is crazier than shit! We all know that.”

“Goddammit,” Jack responded.

Across the parking lot, Connie was rushing to jump into the passenger-side door of a large, old (maybe 1980ish), yellow Ford truck. Mr.

Montgomery from church, Connie's father – who was also the head of the school board – had his arm hanging out of the opened driver's-side window, obviously super pissed. His wrinkly red face looked as if to swell and burst; his bushy white eyebrows only barely hid from view bloodshot, venomous eyes. The truck immediately peeled out and sped off after Connie got inside. Caroline, who had been standing next to Connie, began walking across the parking lot toward Jack, Percy, Sam, and me.

"I guess you all have seen all this stuff, right?" she said as she approached us.

Most of us really didn't know what to say. It was a bit of an awkward situation, and high school kids – even seemingly cool high school kids like Jack – have difficulty finding appropriate words when shit gets awkward. Luckily for us, Sam's loud mouth quickly, as punctual and regular as Old Faithful, spewed: "Holy fuck! Goddamn right we've seen it! What is all this shit? Did Levi do it?"

"Yeah," responded Caroline. "He's the only person who had photos like that of Connie, so it had to have been him. I didn't even know they did that sort of thing – taking pictures like that. She never mentioned anything about it to me. She didn't talk to me about it today, either. Didn't mention whether she thought that it was Levi or not. I'm sure it was, though."

"Well, that's pretty fucked up," Jack concluded.

"Yeah," continued Caroline, "what's doubly shitty about the whole thing is that Connie was planning on having a field party soon, for Halloween."

"Well, *fuccccccck!*" interjected Percy. "Not only does Levi just generally blow donkey dick, now he's single-handedly canceling field parties!"

"I don't know that it's canceled for sure," responded Caroline. "I'm just guessing it will be based on what Connie is going to be dealing with when she has to talk to everyone at school in the coming weeks."

"People fucking suck *ass!*" said Percy.

Percy took me straight home after that. He was frustrated, and we'd both chain-smoked four cigs each in the parking lot anyway, so there was no reason to head up to Cemetery Hill and hang out with Mr. Mercer. Like everyone else, I was sure that Levi did it. It was such a stupid thing to do, and considering that they just broke up that day, I didn't know who else it could possibly be. There were plenty, and I mean *plenty*, of people around school who had a distaste for Levi, though, so it was possible that someone could have planted the photos and framed him. I doubted that, though. Levi made ill-advised, rash decisions so quickly that this seemed exactly like something he would do.

As I said goodbye to Percy and hopped out of the Volv, I immediately noticed the aroma of sizzling steaks wafting from the patio grill. I also noticed that my grandma's car was parked in front of the house. Looked like she was going to be coming over for dinner. I followed my nose and my continuously grumbling stomach toward the food.

CHAPTER

Fourteen



DINNER TALK (ASPARAGUS)

I WAS RIGHT — IT WAS STEAKS. RIBEYE STEAKS WITH TWICE-BAKED potatoes and grilled asparagus. I loved all of those things. The asparagus had a bit of a downside, though, because it made your piss smelly as hell. People had even called me out about it in the bathroom at school the day after eating it. I didn't care though — that shit was delicious.

I sat down at the dining room table with the rest of my family. My sister was on my right, my brother across the table from me, my mom next to

him, and my dad and grandmother at each end of the table.

The dining room table was rectangular, but it was placed in our sort-of oval-shaped dining room. My parents wanted it to look sophisticated, and it was a good attempt, but it still felt a bit awkward. Depending on where you sat, though, you could clearly see the TV in the living room. I always tried to sit in the best place so I could watch TV while I ate. My sister beat me to that spot this evening, though. My dad always inevitably noticed, would become slightly pissed off and get up and turn the TV off, though, so I guess it didn't really matter where I sat.

Before my mom sat down, she brought me a glass of unsweetened iced tea. I liked unsweetened better than the sweet stuff, for some reason. It tasted like water except with a slight bitter kick. I liked that.

Not long after I began slicing apart and subsequently devouring my steak, my dad cut in:

“Don't eat until after we say grace! You know that!”

My dad only said things like that if my grandma was there. On most other occasions, he didn't give a single shit. He'd have been digging into his steak before even me. I knew the game, though. I set down my silverware and bowed my head. As I bowed and closed my eyes, I thought about whether or not Levi was really the one who put all those photos on the cars. I was pretty sure he was, but I was also skilled at concocting conspiracy theories. While I was imagining the possibilities, my dad began:

“Dear Lord, we thank thee for these our gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, amen.”

He always said that prayer. That's how I knew that he was faking. It wasn't because he only did it when Grandma was there, it was because he always quickly mumbled *that* prayer – it was the most basic prayer imaginable. My dad was a smart dude. He could've prayed up something original, thoughtful, and funny if he had wanted to. He never did, though. I

was never convinced that he was fully invested in the whole thing. Religion, that is.

The spiritual dilemma of whether my father was truly a Christian man was not, however, going to prevent me from immediately diving face first back into my steak dinner. I was hungry. Rectangular, frozen pizza, and corn – though undeniably satisfying at lunch – still only went so far. I needed some real sustenance. Unfortunately, my grandma never liked it when people ate their food sloppily. It didn't matter how hungry they were, or if they had to eat rectangular pizza and canned corn for lunch while getting frogged by Brooks.

“*Elbows!*” she excitedly exclaimed, as if by reflex.

She reminded me a little of the Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland* when she yelled like that. It wasn't really an angry yell, but something based more on impulse, triggered by instinctive recognition of her perceptions of politeness. She even wore a bit of a crazed expression as she said it, as if she might follow up her exclamatory demand – if it wasn't immediately obeyed – with the classic condemnation of *OFF WITH HIS HEAD!*

Clearly I didn't want that to happen, so I removed my elbows from the table. Getting judged while trying to crush my only decent meal of the day always slowed my momentum. I was like an animal interrupted in the middle of a feast; like a pet rabbit chewing on a baseboard when its owner walks up and casually, though very loudly, claps right in its ear.

“Don't be rude!” Grandma said. “Don't be a slob!”

I dejectedly went back to my steak, though this time in the politest way I knew how. I still wanted to eat the damn thing. My grandma continued:

“You know, I was talking to Mrs. Mudd today, and she said that her granddaughter is getting married next weekend! In October! What an odd time of year to get married, don't you think?”

“I like the fall,” my dad responded as he crunched into an olive oil-coated stalk of asparagus. “The weather is nice.”

“Yes, but it’s a strange time for weddings, isn’t it? Everyone has a football game or something-or-other to play or watch every weekend.”

“That’s true,” my dad said absentmindedly, now trying unsuccessfully to politely eat his steak as if it wasn’t the only thing on his mind.

“And you know what else?” Grandma continued. “They’re not even going to allow children to go to the reception! They want it to be an adults-only reception! Isn’t that just the strangest thing you ever heard? What’s everyone supposed to do with their children?”

“I guess everyone just wants to be able to focus entirely on their booze without having to chase little kids around,” I began sarcastically. “Maybe they don’t want to have to pretend like they actually enjoy doing the cha-cha slide with their kids. They can just sit and crush their free booze in peace without having to hop three times.”

“Well, *I never!*” my grandma exclaimed. She liked to say that whenever something surprised her or caught her off guard. It was one of her most well-loved phrases.

“Don’t be rude!” my dad cut in. I don’t think he even heard what I said, he just knew that when Grandma said “Well, *I never!*” it meant someone probably said something rude.

“He’s probably right, though,” my grandma continued. “People these days care more about drinking than they do about spending time with family! That’s why this world is going to hell in a handbasket!”

That was another one of her phrases. It sounded to me a bit like the name of some roller coaster at an amusement park, where the “handbasket” would be the car of the coaster. Maybe it’d be one of those indoor coasters in a huge pitch-black room.

“You’re right about that. No one cares about family anymore – only boozing,” my dad interjected, apparently forgetting about the can of PBR

sitting ironically next to his plate. Dad cared about his family, but he also loved drinking, and I'm pretty sure he would gladly hire a babysitter for a night if it meant he could smash free booze in peace at a wedding reception.

"I just can't believe that," my grandma went on. "This world worries me. No one cares about family anymore, and it's just ... do you want some more asparagus, Edward? Your plate is empty!"

She was always easily distracted by the amount of food either remaining on or absent from people's plates.

"I'll get some in a minute." I said.

"Okay, well, you know that I brought derby pie, too! I know it's not in season, but I was craving it!"

"That sounds good!" I hopped up, got myself a piece of pie, sat back down, and began inhaling it. Not long after that, my plate being completely cleaned, I leaned back in my chair, exhaled deeply, and sunk into a state of sedated relaxation. As I zoned out, my dad and grandma continued their discussion about modern family values (or a lack thereof).

Later that night, as I was lying in bed unable to sleep, I began thinking about everything that happened that day at school, and about what my grandma had been saying about the erosion of traditional family values. What did what happened with Nate, with the football team, and with Levi imply about the current state of family values in Abry? Or about Abrian local culture in general? Or about people in general?

Nate was someone who – though naturally a quirky, accepting, curious, and lighthearted person – had been nurtured into a state of perpetual anxiety based on his fear of letting down the authority figures in his life. Those figures were, most predominantly, his parents, who had ingrained within him such an intense belief in and fear of the Christian cosmological and ethical worldview that he was almost continuously paranoid of doing anything that God might find immoral. It was as if he was looking over his shoulder every minute expecting to see Jesus watching him steal cookies

from the metaphoric cookie jar of life. On top of the fears and paranoia wedged deeply into his psyche by his parents, he now also had to deal with additional anxiety created by his girlfriend, Celia, and to a lesser extent, by Coach Sherman. What was both ironic and unfortunate about the whole thing was that Nate's parent's values and the values of Celia didn't align at all. Celia demanded premarital sex and semi-regular alcohol consumption from him. His parents, obviously, were not okay with either of those things. Conversely, his parents, based on their Christian values, did not (or at least they said they didn't) appreciate lying, which is what Nate absolutely *had* to do if he wanted to stay in their good graces. On top of all those factors, there was Nate, who was a naturally anxious individual. All these factors added up to create a person who – one could only guess – was dealing with a lot of shit, and a fuck ton of daily mental stress. What did that imply about the state of traditional family values? Were these “traditional” values even worth a damn?

Then you had the football team. A collection of kids who had been so hyped up, and who had their inflated teenage egos stroked so much by the local community that they could get absolutely obliterated at the only thing that they really cared about being good at and *still* come out of it cocky and pretentious as ever. It'd be like if I considered myself the greatest mathematician in school, got an *F* on every test, and still, for some reason, walked around school every day talking about how great at math I was. That's how people are, though. Once they get something in their mind – once they consider themselves to be an *expert* at something – nothing will stop them from holding that belief. Demonstrable, hard evidence of the opposite truth sure as hell won't get in their way. Why would it?

But can someone ever truly be successful if everyone around them tells them they're great even when they blow ass? Is success even objective, or is it based only on the value others ascribe to it? Maybe the football players

were successful simply because the local community treated them like they were.

Then, lastly, you had Levi. Here was a guy who found satisfaction almost solely in the recognition he received from the people he deemed important. Not the people he personally felt were important, outside of their standing within the community, but the people he thought were important based on how he felt they fit into the hierarchical structure of Abrian social life. He was as fake as someone could possibly be. He was also, however, certainly unique in some ways, and the things he said were sometimes unfortunately hilarious, but the only reason he ever said anything that was supposed to be funny was because he wanted to impress the people he thought had the social power to make him seem like an important person. I wanted to think that it was sad, and it probably was, but I couldn't really call it *uniquely* sad, as it applied to Levi, or to the football players, precisely because it wasn't something that was unique. Not even close. It's not like Levi or the football players had some sort of mental illness. They were just like everyone else. Being slightly psychotic, unfortunately, is completely normal. Then you have Nate, on the other hand, who wasn't like that at all, but who had been beaten into submission by people like that – by the majority. *He's* the one society would call mentally ill or would call abnormal. And the only reason he would be considered that way is because *almost everyone else* was more selfish than him. He didn't possess the proper dosage of sociopathy to be considered completely sane.

Sanity, it seems, was the extent to which one can convince themselves that *they aren't insane*. It's a big farce, sanity is, and it gets worse with age; at least, in the sense that as people get older tend to become "saner."

Human community, sometimes, can feel like a disease.

CHAPTER

Fifteen



HOLES

LATER THAT WEEKEND — HOURS AFTER THE SUN SANK BELOW THE central Kentucky horizon — the Volv pulled up silently to my parent’s house. The normal sputter of the car was reduced to a coughing whisper, as if the vehicle knew it was supposed to be quiet. I hopped in, this time in the back seat, as the front seat was already taken by Sam. Joining me in the back were Eliot and Brooks.

“You’re gonna make me sit in the middle, huh! Even though you’re the smallest!” Eliot said as he slid over, a welcoming smile on his face.

“What’s up, bitch!” Brooks said as he reached across Eliot and gave me a haymaker of a left-handed frog. His southpaws still hurt pretty good, though not as bad as the righties.

“I reckon so!” I responded to Eliot. Eliot smelled like fuming booze. Sam did as well. Brooks didn’t drink, and Percy was driving, so he wasn’t drinking either.

“You want some, man?” Eliot said, pulling a fifth of Fighting Cock from his backpack and passing it to me.

I took the bottle and tipped it back. I was never the best at swigging booze. Bourbon, which I found more palatable than most other liquors, was still even a bit difficult for me. Nonetheless, I took down as much as I thought I could handle and then, grimacing, handed the bottle back to Eliot. He wasted no time in taking another healthy pull.

After the burn of the liquor had subsided, I finally spoke up. “So what are we doing tonight?”

“We’re striking back!” Sam said, leaning back from the front seat, booze wafting from his breath and permeating the entirety of the interior of the Volv. “We’re gonna hit the bastards right where it hurts ‘em most! Right in their tiny little shrimp *dicks*! Right in their two-incher clinchers!”

“I’m not sure what that means,” said Percy as he glanced at me through the rearview mirror, “but we’ve decided to dig up some muh’ fuggin’ notes tonight. You know the notes I’m talking about. The ones the football players buried. And that tape from the Bardstown game, too.”

“Oh, shit,” I said.

The heat and claustrophobia of anxiety and nervousness crept over my body. I was scared shitless. This was the type of thing that would get all of us into at minimum some semi-serious shit both at school with Coach Sherman and at home with our parents. The more I thought about it, though,

the more I realized that this was something that I wanted to do. Those football players held a much too lofty opinion of themselves and of their team, and they needed to be knocked down a few pegs, or at very minimum, be made aware that not everyone thought they were the shit. If it was for anyone's good, it was for their own. They couldn't go through life forever getting pampered while simultaneously failing to achieve their goals, all the while treating their fellow man (in this case their classmates) like lower-class citizens. It would catch up to them eventually. If not in Abry, then later on in life when they graduated and had to venture out into the open ocean and start swimming with the big fish. It was better that they got a taste of it now. Better for them.

"I'm down, let's do it!" I responded. I grabbed the fifth from Eliot and took another glugging swig.

As we cruised around Abry, windows down, sunroof open, music blaring (it was *Bigmouth Strikes Again* by The Smiths), Eliot laid out the plan to me.

"Okay, dude," he began, "so we found out from an inside source that the tapes are buried right behind the big water tower behind the school. This source also told us that we would be able to see a bunch of dirt where they buried everything, so it should be easy to find."

"Was Nate the inside source?" I responded naively.

"Fuck no, dude! You think he'd tell us something like this? Well, he might, but if he did, it'd be completely accidental. We could've gotten him to tell us if we wanted to. Regardless, though, it wasn't him! It was one of the 'equipment managers,' those girls who follow Coach Sherman around so they don't have to do shit during school. Those girls he says super creepy shit to all the time. One of them, Rebecca, apparently doesn't like him very much."

"Wonder why," I interjected.

“So, as I was saying, we know where all the shit is buried. We’re going to park the Volv in the parking lot of the auto factory near the water tower – Akebono. The four of us, excluding Percy, are going to run up to where everything is buried. Sam, Brooks, and I are going to dig everything up. While we’re digging, I want you to stand on that hill the water tower is on and give us some eyes on the school grounds. Make sure no one is coming from that direction. Percy is going to stay in the Volv so that we can get the hell out of there as quickly as possible when we finish. You got it?”

“Seems pretty clear to me,” I responded. “So all I have to do is keep watch?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

“Sounds good. Let’s get it done.”

After driving around a bit longer, we finally approached the warehouse near the school. The factory – a car parts manufacturing company where many Abry High students wound up working after they graduated – was located west of the water tower, which was in turn located west of the school, which sat – as previously mentioned – as the summit of Lincoln Hill. This meant that we’d be climbing up the hill to get to the water tower from the factory.

Being that it was late at night on a Friday, the parking lot was empty. This factory didn’t operate around the clock like many others do. Percy backed the Volv into the parking spot that seemed like it would be most accessible while running down the hill from the water tower. He then jumped out of the car, opened the trunk, and began pulling out shovels and handing them to Eliot, Brooks, and Sam. They were the same folding military shovels that we had used to dig up the sign in front of the weight room. He also pulled out a pair of binoculars and gave them to me.

“All right, boys, get to work!” Percy jokingly exclaimed as he clapped Sam on the back with more force than was necessary. Sam, being a much

smaller person than Percy, stumbled forward and dropped his shovel. It clattered loudly on the cracked asphalt.

“Fuck, Percy, chill out!” His voice cracking, more surprised than he should have been. He was anxious about our mission.

“He’s right! Let’s go!” said Eliot as he began trotting up the hill. We followed along behind him, holding our shovels like they were weapons. It was like we were Spartan soldiers storming the beach of Troy – Spartan soldiers wielding shovels and binoculars. Eliot was Achilles and the rest of us, following behind, were his Myrmidon. Brooks, as big and menacing as he was, made a good Ajax.

It didn’t take us long to reach the water tower. After one quick perimeter sweep, we easily found the spot where the football team buried all their shit. Eliot – not being one to waste time in these types of situations – began digging vigorously. While working away at the hole, he looked up at me.

“Go stand watch, Ed! Run over there near the road so you can see anyone coming from the school!”

I did as I was told and scampered – as militaristically and stealthily as I knew how – to the spot where I was instructed to keep watch. Not long after reaching the post, the excitement died down and everything became calm and a bit dull. I could still see the shrunken shadows of Eliot, Sam, and Brooks as they continued their excavation. They seemed to be working pretty hard; I guess I got the easy job. At one point, I heard the distant voice of Brooks as he yelled at Sam and frogged him in the arm. Eliot then yelled at Brooks to stop fucking around and keep digging. I became so fixated on watching them that I began to lose focus on the task I was supposed to be doing. A quick turnaround glance up at the school and the road leading to it showed that no one was coming.

After staring toward the school for some time, however, I saw the weight room door open. The outside lights in the parking lot were on. Nervous, I grabbed the binoculars Percy gave me and smashed them against

my face. It was Coach Sherman! He didn't seem to notice anything we were doing, though. He was with someone else. It was a teenage girl. It was the Rebecca girl that Eliot had been talking about in the Volv. He was holding her by the arm. He *grabbed* her. Then, a moment later, she turned away and began walking across the parking lot to leave. She looked scared; I saw it through the binoculars. Coach Sherman also turned and then paced frustratedly to his truck.

I looked down to where Eliot, Brooks, and Sam were digging. They seemed about done, so I stumbled frantically down the hill back to where they were.

"Let's go, boys!" I shouted as I ran by. "I saw Coach Sherman up at the weight room! Let's hit the road!"

"*Goddammit!*" yelled Brooks as a look of horror spread across his face and he began sprinting down the hill toward the Volv.

It didn't take us very long to make it back – it was a quick downhill run. Once we made it to the parking lot, we saw Percy leaning on the hood of the car, smoking a cig.

"Let's roll! Let's fucking roll, dude!" yelled Sam as he ripped open the back door and dove inside. Percy hastily threw his cig on the ground, stamped it out, yanked open the driver's side door, got in, and peeled out – to the extent that a 1990 Volvo is capable of peeling out.

"Did you all get the shit?" he said after we had made it out of the parking lot and back out onto the road.

"Hell yeah, we did!" said Eliot, showing Percy the spoils of the raid. "We're gonna have to read some of these! Nate's says pretty much exactly what he told us it did, unfortunately. No surprises there."

"Look at what Nolan Jones' fucking says!" said Sam as he shuffled through the pile of notes. He held Nolan's note up to the back-seat light and began to read: "I want to be the best brother and teammate that I can to

everyone on the team, and I want to make sure that we all accomplish our goals so that we don't let Coach down."

"What a fucking *idiot!*" exclaimed Sam after he had finished. "That dude doesn't have much going on upstairs at all, does he?"

"Doesn't seem to be the case," said Percy. "So you all didn't see anyone up there, right?"

"Oh shit! No, dude, we saw Coach Sherman!" said Eliot.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Yeah! Ed saw him coming out of the weight room! Right, Ed?"

"Yeah, I did," I began. I didn't know whether I should tell them that I'd seen him with Rebecca; I thought it might drive Sam into some hysterical rant about how shitty everyone associated with Abry High School was. I decided that I'd tell them anyway, though, and risk the lecture.

"I saw not only Coach Sherman, but also that Rebecca girl. The one that told us where we could find the spot to dig up all this shit. They came out of the weight room together. I don't know what they were doing in there, but there's no reason he should have a student in there with him at this hour. He also sort of grabbed at her as she was leaving. Looked like he was trying to do something sketchy. Then she walked off, I guess to walk home, and he started walking to his truck."

"What the fuck?" Sam said, mid-swig of Fighting Cock. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Yeah, dude, it blew my mind."

"That is fucking crazy! If she's up there smooching Coach, why did she tell us where we could dig up all this shit?"

"Who the hell knows," said Eliot. "Maybe she's pissed off at him because he's married and she wants his dumb ass all to herself. Or maybe – which wouldn't be surprising at all – maybe he's creepy as fuck and she doesn't even really like his ass. We all know that's at least half true, anyway. He's fucking weird"

“Yeah,” said Percy. “He’s a super creep. That whole situation just makes me cringe, dude. Both him and her. They’re both weirdos, as far as I’m concerned. He’s slimier, though, obviously.”

“Yeah,” said Eliot, booze once again permeating the Volv, “he’s way creepier than her. He’s old as hell! He’s got a kid and shit! And he’s just up here at the weight room, on a Friday night, tonguing some fucking high school kid? What the fuck?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We don’t know what they were doing in there, dude, so don’t just go making shit up, but still ... turns out he’s even creepier than we thought he was, and we already knew he was pretty damn creepy. So, what should we do with all of these notes and this tape?”

Eliot stared one-eyed into the finished bottle of Bourbon. A single drop fell into his eye. He blinked and winced in pain, then said, “I know exactly what the fuck we should do.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen



THIRD STRING

AFTER DRIVING AROUND TOWN SMOKING CIGS, LISTENING TO MUSIC AS loudly as the HP speakers would blast – and debating what we should do next – we finally pulled the trigger on our plan and stopped the Volv around the corner from Coach Sherman’s house. Sherman lived on the corner of Bellevue Avenue and Lincoln Hill Road, the road that led to Abry High. Bellevue Avenue was the same street I lived on – maybe eight or ten houses down.

“Okay, guys,” Eliot began, “here’s what we’re going to do: Sam and I are going to sneak up to the slimy old bastard’s front porch, throw all the shit onto it, and then run the hell back here. Pretty simple, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Percy, “sounds simple enough to me. What if you all get caught?”

“If we get caught, you all just drive the living fuck out of here at goddamn lightspeed. No reason all of us should go down with the ship. Anyway, we should probably go ahead and get this thing done; the sooner the better, right? You ready, Sam?”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” Sam said with a heavier tone of reluctance and fear than was typical of him.

“Okay, let’s do it! I also wrote Coach Sherman this nice little note that we’re going to leave with all the shit.”

“You wrote him a note?” exclaimed Percy. “Why the hell did you do that?”

Percy didn’t get a response, because Eliot and Sam had already gotten out of the car and begun running as quickly and quietly as they could down the road. They were both crouched down as if in the middle of a top-secret operation of the utmost importance.

While they were completing their mission, Percy, Brooks, and I sat in the Volv and listened to music. We were listening to *Bombshell* by Operation Ivy. The car sat idling in the parking lot of a nearby pawn shop that had recently closed down. Just about every business that opened in Abry, unless it was fast food, a gas station, or a grocery store, inevitably went out of business. The town population was too small to support very much small business, and Abry wasn’t bringing in many tourists to spend money in town, either. Abry’s only claim to fame was that Abraham Lincoln’s parents once lived and got married here, which wasn’t exactly cause for droves of tourists to flock in. That pawn shop was one of the many victims of this stale local commerce.

“How long do you think it will take them, man?” Brooks spoke up from the back seat, “Don’t you think we should drive around the block or something? It’s pretty suspicious just sitting here in this vacant parking lot.”

Brooks was not his usual, violent, hyper self. He was visibly nervous and clearly afraid.

“No, we’ll be fine. We told Eliot and Sam we’d sit here and wait for them, so that’s what we need to do. They’ll only take a minute, anyway. All they have to do is run up to the porch and throw the shit on there.”

We sat quietly for a few more minutes. Smoked a couple cigs. Stared out the window. The streets were empty. We didn’t see a single car drive by the whole time we were parked there. The only sign of life was the distant honk of a horn down on Main Street and the even farther off *moo* of a cow from up in the field across from Main Street, adjacent to Cemetery Hill. That was a hell of a ways off, too, so that must have been one noisy ass cow. I bet she really got on the nerves of the other cows, being such a fucking loudmouth like that.

A bag blew across the parking lot like tumbleweed in an old Western film, flipping and turning like litter-turned-ballerina. It was a bag of Funyuns. I don’t think they had Funyuns back in the Old West, though. Probably not at the ballet, either – Funyuns are too trashy, no pun intended. Tasty as hell, though.

Looking out the window as I tossed out my third cig, I saw the shadowy figures of Eliot and Sam darting back up the street toward the Volv. I knew it was them because of the way they were running. Eliot was flailing his long, lanky arms around, and Sam, much shorter-legged, was trailing behind him, out of breath, trying to catch up. It reminded me of *The Lord of the Rings* movies when Gimli would have so much trouble keeping up with Aragorn and Legolas as they ran across the country. Gimli got a bad rap for all that bullshit, though. The dude had much shorter legs than the other two, and he was carrying by far the heaviest armor, and that big-ass battle ax.

Despite all of that, he was still capable of running his fat dwarven ass all the way across Middle Earth – through the snow around Moria, across the hilly countryside of Rohan, and through Fangorn Forest. The dude had to have been in amazing shape. Sam wasn't in amazing shape, though – not at all. He only had to run halfway down one street and he was already panting and sweating profusely as he jumped into the backseat of the Volv.

“Hey!” said Brooks. “Don't rub your nasty sweat all over me!”

“Sorry, dude. Holy fuck! That wore my lazy ass out!”

“Well, shit,” said Percy. “You only ran down one street. You need to stop smoking so many cigs and take a goddamn jog around the block every once in a while. Did you all get the job done?”

“Hell yeah, we did! And no one saw anything! Coach Sherman definitely didn't see us. Who knows if he's even home yet, the slimy fuck. No one else saw us either. There was one front porch light one, but that was it. We're good.”

“Well, let's get the hell out of here, then,” Percy said as he shifted the Volv into drive. “Hey, what did you write in that note to Coach Sherman, anyway?”

“Oh! Dude!” said Eliot. “I wrote: ‘Third string quarterback = third string coach.’ You know he was the third string quarterback at UK when he was in college, right? Backing up Tim Couch's backup! That'll really piss him off. Oh, yeah, and I also wrote: ‘P.S. We know your slimy secret, you pervy bitch.’ That's something I added just right when we got to his porch. It just came to me at the spur of the moment. Figured he deserved it.”

“Goddammit, dude. Who knows what sort of drama that's going to cause. Hopefully his wife doesn't divorce him or some shit.”

“If she does, he deserves it, right? Doesn't he?”

“He is most definitely a piece of shit, so I guess he deserves whatever comes from this,” Percy said and whipped the Volv out of the parking lot and down the road toward Main Street. We went up to Cemetery Hill,

smoked a few cigs, bullshat with Mr. Mercer, then called it a night. When Percy pulled up in front of my house to drop me off, Bellevue Avenue was as quiet as the grave.

CHAPTER

Seventeen



GOOCH SMOOCHERS

THE NEXT MONDAY AT SCHOOL, EVERYONE FILED INTO THE GYM, WITH my group taking our customary spot at the top of the bleachers. We were a little quieter than usual but otherwise weren't acting that weird. Nate – who wasn't aware of the events of the previous weekend – was as chatty as ever. No one else had much to say, though. We were all waiting for the ramifications of what we'd done. This time things wouldn't simply blow over. There was no way.

Mr. Tucker's class was also quiet. Tucker, who was never very active anyway – especially on Monday – didn't have much to say. He just let us work on our projects. Considering all the time he'd devoted to letting us develop these projects in class, you'd assume they were going to be the most detailed, informative, analytical projects ever created by a high school social-studies class. That likely would not be the case, however, as almost all the students spent their project time doing whatever they could to entertain themselves other than the project itself. Most of them would probably still receive decent grades, too. Mr. Tucker didn't give a shit. He was the type of teacher that would give students a passing grade just so he wouldn't have to deal with their anger toward him when he told them they had failed.

My project, as opposed to much of the other work I did for school, was coming along nicely. I'd almost finished it. Judas Iscariot, I concluded, could only be considered, at worst, a very average person. You couldn't logically or morally justify categorizing him in any objectively negative way. I didn't think many of my classmates would agree with me, though. Lots of them were your standard, run-of-the-mill Christians – or at least they considered themselves to be. I would probably offend a lot of them when I read my paper in front of the class. I wasn't sure whether we were expected to do that – read our papers in front of the class, that is – but I thought I remembered Mr. Tucker saying we would. He was never skilled at communicating expectations or parameters for assignments, but I was pretty sure he'd mentioned that.

Salisbury steak was on the lunch menu, with peas and mashed potatoes. Lots of people hated that meal, but I fucking liked it. If you drowned the steak and potatoes in that shitty gelatin-like gravy they gave you, it wasn't bad, and peas were peas; they weren't the type of vegetable that could ever exceed or fail to live up to expectations. They were always the same: fucking peas. If there were ever a chef who could make peas exceptional, I

would consider that bastard the greatest cook who'd ever lived, because peas were always just peas. Not even butter helped them all that much.

As I was using a spoon to cut apart my curiously tender steak, Nate stared at me and Brooks with a look of genuine concern on his face.

"Dude, did Coach Sherman talk to you this morning?"

"No," I replied. "Why?"

"He talked to me. I think he talked to all of us football players. He probably wanted to ask us about it first. Apparently, someone dug up the notes that we wrote and threw them onto his porch. They wrote some threatening message to him, too. That's so messed up!"

"Oh ..." I began. "Well, at least your goal isn't buried under the ground now! It's still got a chance! It may just hop off Sherman's porch and flutter the hell away like a butterfly! Catch some wind and reach for the stars!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Coach Sherman walking across the cafeteria toward us. He stopped at our table and put his hand on Brooks' shoulder.

"Could you come with me for a second, son? I need to talk to you about something."

Brooks, who hadn't yet eaten any of his lunch, looked horrified. Coach Sherman, surely, could see the terror on his face. The two of them got up and walked together out of the cafeteria. I looked out the window to the parking lot facing the weight room and saw them walking inside. Not long after, the blinds to Coach Sherman's office closed.

Brooks didn't come out of the weight room before the end-of-lunch bell rang, which meant that I wouldn't know what Coach Sherman had asked him until later, and I wouldn't know what he had told Coach either. It also meant that Brooks didn't get to eat any lunch, and he was *always* really on edge in the first place, so he was going to be extra pissy. That dude was going to be sucker punching anyone who came across his path for the rest of the day. He was probably at the point that he'd even slug Mr. Tucker if

he rolled his shoulders at him the wrong way. Counterclockwise instead of the more familiar clockwise, maybe. Yeah, old Tucker had better hide behind his paper for the rest of the day, for his own good. Take a damn nap or something.

Not knowing what Brooks and Coach Sherman had talked about caused me to become wrapped in a sort of anxious, nervous haze for the rest of the afternoon. Every time I turned a corner in the hallway, I half-expected to see Coach Sherman strolling down the hall at a terrifyingly brisk pace, reaching out an ever-extending tentacle of an arm and ever-lengthening fingers, his fingernails transforming into claws, drawing me in like a magnet to put his creepy-ass hand on my pussy-ass shoulder and tell me: *Come with me son, I need to talk to you about something.*

That never happened, but the anticipation of it was bad enough. Other than that sense of dread, though, the rest of the day went smoothly. I had journalism class after lunch, and Percy, Jack, and I once again ditched class to go play computer games in the library. We didn't mention anything to Jack about what we did last weekend. We didn't want to tell anyone about it until we knew for sure that it had completely blown over. We just sat there and played games. We were playing that side-scrolling game where you're driving a dirt-bike. The bastard riding the thing had absolutely no sense of balance, so you had to keep the bike from crashing while it barreled over these huge hills and ramps and whatnot. The driver of the bike would launch over a hill and somehow – as uncoordinated as he seemed – bust out a triple backflip. Even though he was decked out in what looked to be all the best dirt-biking gear, he really had no natural balance or skill at all; he was like a rag doll. Maybe he was supposed to be wasted or something. That would make sense. If he had someone driving for him, and he didn't have to worry about keeping the bike steady by himself, maybe he would take the time to write up a drunken hate-mail note and throw it on the doorstep of his least favorite teacher. He didn't though, so he was instead

relegated to riding the bike as far as Percy's nimble fingers, trained from years of playing video games, could take him, before he inevitably crashed into an ultra-deep chasm and snapped his neck, hopefully achieving a high score along the way. At that point, if he did get a high score, he'd look up dazedly from the crash, giving a thumbs up and sporting a mostly toothless, bloody grin. That dude was a real trooper.

Though we waited out the end of eighth period playing that game, and though the afternoon had passed without a single peep, the day, unfortunately, wouldn't end so easily. That just wasn't in the cards. Right before the end-of-the-day-bell rang, we heard the voice of the principal who, after giving her afternoon announcements, gave a final notice that sent chills all up and down my goddamn little high-school-kid spine.

"And lastly, could Percy Huck, Sam Rowan, Eliot Florence, and Eddie Marsh please report to the principal's office before you leave today? Have a good weekend!"

I immediately looked over at Percy: "Welp, I guess we're pretty good and fucked, huh?"

"Yeah," he responded, "that seems to be the case, doesn't it?"

"What the hell did you all do?" interjected Jack.

Jack was someone who really, really hated being out of the loop on things. When there was something seemingly important that he didn't know about, or wasn't filled in on, he felt that he was personally being left out, or that people had deliberately gone and done something incredibly fun without him.

"We'll tell you later," Percy responded. "The whole story is dependent on what happens after we go into the principal's office."

Percy and I said goodbye to Ms. Carpenter as we left the library and took a right out into the hallway toward the principal's office. We didn't get very far down the hall before Eliot and Sam caught up to us from behind.

Sam, the same as Percy and me, looked uneasy. Eliot, on the other hand, looked to be in good spirits. He even looked a little excited.

“Well, boys,” he began, “looks like we’re all going down, huh! Show’s over for us!”

That was the problem about Eliot – he didn’t give a shit about anything. He could get kicked out of school and be relegated to working for the rest of his life as a gas-station attendant and he wouldn’t give a single shit. He’d probably even be a little happy about it, in some ways. He’d stand there smoking cigs all day, listening to music and making smart-ass comments to the customers. They’d like it, though. He’d sound genuine enough about it that they’d like it.

“Yep! We’re going down!” he continued. “Wonder who ratted us out, though? You think it was that Rebecca girl? That wouldn’t make too much sense, considering she purposely told us where all that shit was buried, but who knows – I guess I’ve heard stranger things. Maybe she’s secretly got it out for us for some reason. Did we ever do anything to piss her off?”

“No,” I responded, “we never did shit to piss her off. I didn’t, at least. I don’t know about your dumb ass. But I can make a pretty good guess as to why Brooks isn’t here.”

I wouldn’t have really – under normal circumstances – been able to make a good guess as to why Brooks wasn’t there. I would have just trusted that he’d never rat on us. I was pretty damn naive. But considering that I’d physically seen Brooks go into Coach Sherman’s office to talk to him, I could – because of that knowledge – make a good guess as to why he wasn’t there.

“Oh, shit!” interjected Sam excitedly. “That bastard ratted us out!”

“That seems to be the case,” I responded.

“Well, goddamn!” said Eliot. “Didn’t take him long, did it? That little pussy! I hope they at least water-boarded him or something. Gave him a bit

of a torture-session before he gave us up. If that's the case, I think I can still be friends with his ass. Otherwise, no fuckin way!"

Eliot still didn't seem to really care about the whole thing. He'd probably keep hanging out with Brooks as if nothing had happened.

We continued down the hallway toward the principal's office. The hallway seemed to continue forever, as if the building itself were expanding. Those twenty seconds or so we were walking down that hallway felt like an eternity. Each step could be temporally separated from the next, and, within each of them, there was an infinite amount of time. I was like Zeno's Achilles racing against the tortoise, but I didn't want to reach the finish line. I needed to savor each free moment I had left. The clock was ticking loudly on the wall. Some kid was in the family resource office bitching about how he didn't have any goddamn pencils so it was no wonder he couldn't ever do any of his homework. The water fountain was making that weird humming noise it had picked up through years of use and abuse. I stopped, just to grab a few more seconds of freedom, and swigged a drink. The fountain, though certainly abused, still pumped out some damn-cold aqua. I slurped that shit, wiped my mouth with my sleeve as sloppily as only an irresponsible high school kid can, and then suddenly – with a sense of immediate dread, as if I'd somehow forgotten the reason that I was walking down the hall in the first place – noticed the door to the principal's office right in front of me.

The door was locked. Inside was Levi Wagner, who was speaking animatedly at both the principal and the vice principal. I guess he was first in line for punishment. It was odd because I'd never seen any truly genuine expression from him. Everything was always sarcastic, joking, and completely dramatized. Maybe this conversation was, too, but if that was the case, then this was the only time he'd ever done a very good job of it. He seemed truly angry and legitimately upset. After a few minutes, he

yanked open the door and walked out. Seeing us standing in the hallway, he spoke up.

“Those bastards think I spread all those pictures of Connie around school! Why the hell would I ever do *that*? I *love* her! Plus, they don’t even have any evidence. They just picked the person that seems sketchiest to them. The person that doesn’t do so well in school. That’s me, of course. I get caught smoking cigs in the bathroom like three times a week, for fuck’s sake. They think I’m sketchy as hell because of that. I didn’t do that shit though; would *never* do it.”

“Yeah, well,” Percy responded mellowly, “those bastards are fuckers.”

“They sure as hell are! Goddamn gooch-smoochers! Hey, anyway, what the hell are you guys doing here?”

“They think that we dug up those notes the football team buried and then threw them on Coach Sherman’s porch.”

“Aw, hell! Did you do it?”

“Uh,” stammered Percy, “no, we didn’t do it. What, you think we’d do something that stupid? Whoever did it wrote a threatening note to Coach. Maybe we’d dig up the notes and the tape, but we wouldn’t write some stupid fucking note like that. We’re not *idiots*. Not to that extent, at least.”

“True!” said Levi. “That’s very true. You boys are smarter than that. Well, I didn’t do it either - spread those pictures around, I mean. I didn’t do that shit. I’m not guilty of anything, so I’m not going to pretend to be guilty. I’m not going to act scared or any bullshit like that. I’m still going to go to Connie’s Halloween party. She’ll find out that I didn’t do it by then, anyway, so she probably won’t be pissed that I’m there. You guys believe me, don’t you?”

A few seconds of awkward silence passed, and then, as if broken from a baffled trance, I spoke up.

“Uh, yeah, of course we believe you, dude.”

“Good! I always know that I can count on you guys. Anyway, I’m heading home. Good luck in there, boys! Give ‘em hell! And, hey! Don’t walk down this hallway after me for a while – I’m about to crop dust the *shit* out of this bitch.”

Levi strolled away and briefly turned back to look at us. A sly grin crept across his face, as if he’d been suppressing it throughout the entirety of the conversation and he could finally – now that he’d said what he’d intended to say – let it out. Maybe it was the gas. Maybe it was something else.

The principal’s office was cooler than the rest of the school. It was like they only gave a shit about blasting the AC in there, but they were fine with letting the rest of the school sweat its collective nuts off every day. I could understand why Mr. Tucker used his newspaper as a fan, flapping it back and forth in front of his face as he “read” it. That school was hot as hell, even in the fall. It was like it held in the summer heat and refused to release it until around November, at which point it would immediately become colder than shit.

The four of us stood in front of the principal’s desk awaiting instruction. The principal, Mrs. Simms, sat at her desk with the perfect professional posture everyone had come to expect from her. On her desk was a huge paper calendar and a fancy collection of different colored pens. The calendar had been marked up to hell and back. There were also lots of notes and reminders on the whiteboard hanging from the wall behind her; Post-it notes littering the entire thing. You could tell that she took her job seriously. Next to her stood the vice principal, Mr. Carrico. He was a short, stocky man with a receding hairline. He wore these thick brown glasses that looked multiple decades old. He also wore these old short-sleeved yellow button-up shirts featuring very visible, somehow greenish pit stains. It gave his wardrobe character, I guess. You could smell him by sight alone. Based on his appearance, he reminded me of that character from *Office Space*, the one always bitching about his stapler. Mr. Carrico wasn’t a pushover like

that, though. He could be a real bastard. After the two of them were finished sizing us up, Mrs. Simms spoke.

“You boys can take a seat. We’re still waiting for Coach Sherman to come.”

We sat there and waited. It took a while. You would think – being that Mrs. Simms was Coach Sherman’s boss – he’d show up at least somewhat punctually. Guess not. Guess he had some important shit to take care of. Maybe with that Rebecca girl.

“You all at least got a magazine we can read or something?” Eliot exclaimed after a while, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“No, Mr. Florence, we don’t. The coach will be here momentarily.”

A bit later, Coach Sherman finally showed up. He was wearing the royal blue track suit he always wore. The one with the school logo on it. He entered the room, grabbed an armless chair, flipped it around, and sat in it backward, facing us. He was the type of person who did shit like that. I guess he didn’t realize that everyone stopped thinking it was cool when they turned like fucking seven. Who knows, though. Based on how much everyone around school jerked him off, they probably did think it was cool. It wasn’t, though. Trust me.

“Boys,” he began, “I’ve heard from a reliable source that you were the ones who dug those tapes up, and the ones who wrote me that nice little note.”

“Uh,” Percy started, “no, we didn’t do it.”

“That’s what I figured you would say, and trust me, I get it. You’re a bunch of mischievous little teenagers. You don’t have anything better to do on the weekends, probably because you’re not involved in any extracurricular activities, so you entertain yourself by doing stuff like this. I get it. And just so you know, I could most certainly get the police involved in this. I still haven’t made up my mind about whether I’m going to, but I don’t think I am. I don’t think that would do you boys any favors. What I

am going to do, though, is talk to your parents about it. They need to understand the stress you've caused my family. On top of that, I want to mention a couple of things to you all about it right here, right now. I know that you probably don't care very much about what you've done. You're apathetic. You should care, though, because it's affected, and it's going to affect, many people – many of your classmates. That note is very threatening. When I read it, I was afraid. I was afraid for the safety of my family. I have a young child. You need to know that. You also need to know what a disservice you've done to your classmates on the football team. Those notes were supposed to be confidential among the football players, and you destroyed that confidentiality, that sense of safety they felt when they wrote and buried everything. What was once cathartic is now a source of embarrassment. This may not only affect the player's mental and emotional well-being, but it could also affect the team itself, in terms of wins and losses. A team that isn't unified doesn't play as well, and your little shenanigans have disrupted team unity. That's about all I've got to say to you boys, though. I'm truly disappointed, and I hope you never do anything like that again."

Coach Sherman got out of his backward chair and left the room without putting it back under the table where it belonged. He walked confidently out of the office, his track pants swishing, and loudly slammed the door.

"You boys are lucky Coach Sherman seems to have decided not to press charges," said Principal Simms. "Since he's decided to let you off the hook, I've decided that I'm going to do the same. I'm going to be informing your parents about what you've done, as Coach Sherman stated, but that's it. Any reprimand that will come from this will have to come from your parents. You all are free to go."

We stood up and hurried out of the office. As we walked back down the hallway, which still held the lingering scent of Levi's ass, Sam spoke up.

“Well, hell! We got out of that one, huh? I thought for sure Coach Sherman was going to try and fuck us as hard as he could – right up our poop-shoots! Wonder why he didn’t?”

“He doesn’t give a single shit about us,” said Percy. “It’s hard to want to fuck someone over when you don’t have any feelings – either positive or negative – toward them. He didn’t feel threatened by us, or by that note, either. You can bet on that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He doesn’t care. What about that shit he said, though? About the wins and losses and whatnot? Wasn’t that some straight bullshit?”

“Fuck yeah, it was!” said Sam. “I was suppressing a laugh – a fucking cackle – when he said that. The most fucked up part of that whole thing is that I think he actually believed that shit, dude – as if he’d forgotten that the football team just got their asses smacked by Bardstown! Jesus *Christ*!”

“Well,” Eliot concluded, “I guess we can consider ourselves lucky. We live to fight another day, boys!”

The sunshine felt a little shinier that day as we whipped the Volv out of the school parking lot and onto Lincoln Hill Road. The cool autumn breeze, filtering in through the open sunroof, felt a little cool autumn breezier. *Sound and Vision* by David Bowie rang out of the windows as we cruised toward Cemetery Hill. It was time for a smoke. I wondered silently what Mr. Merce would think of our shenanigans.

CHAPTER

Eighteen



TOMATOES

“WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?” SAID MY DAD AFTER HE PUT down the phone. He’d just finished talking to Coach Sherman.

“I just ... I just don’t understand what in the hell you possibly could have been thinking. You know what this makes you look like? Street trash. It makes you look like a damn future criminal. This is the type of thing you expect from some kid who ... who *everyone knows* isn’t going anywhere in life. Clearly I don’t think that’s the case with you, but that’s what it looks

like from the outside. You need to understand that. What you need to understand more than that, though, is that by doing this you have really affected a family's feeling of safety, if not with Coach Sherman himself, with his wife! This was a very, very bad, and an extremely stupid thing to do, Ed."

I stood silently as my father gave me his opinion of what I'd done. He was mostly right. It was a pretty stupid thing to do. I'm not saying I regretted it or anything like that; I didn't. I definitely thought Coach Sherman needed to be knocked down a few pegs, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a stupid thing to do. I didn't really have any intention of arguing with my dad about anything he was saying.

"So," he continued, "we're going over to Coach Sherman's house, right now. You're going to apologize to him for this, directly to his face."

That, however, got my blood boiling. I didn't mind my dad telling me how stupid I was, but by no means did I have any interest in going over to Sherman's house to apologize. That dude, regardless of how stupid our actions were, was still a bastard, and deserved no apology.

"What!" I began, "No way! That dude is a bastard! I can't go apologize to him!"

It was, from my perspective, a perfectly sound argument. My dad, however, didn't agree, as it only pissed him off even more. His face, which had up to that point mostly maintained its standard hue, now became visibly red.

"Go outside and get in the damn truck," he said through his teeth.

As I mentioned earlier, Coach Sherman lived on the same street as my family, so the drive over to his house only took us about twenty seconds. On the way over, we didn't do any talking. The only sound was the ringing voice of Bob Marley singing *Three Little Birds*, which erupted from the speakers of my dad's old Dodge truck immediately after he turned the keys in the ignition. I guess he'd been jamming earlier and hadn't turned the

volume down. It was a bit of a funny song to suddenly hear at full blast, especially considering the situation, but he didn't seem to think so. It just pissed him off even more. He aggressively turned the volume knob and stared fuming mad at the road ahead. The problem, though, was that the volume knob in his old Dodge truck was a bit broken. It wouldn't work if you turned it too quickly; you had to turn it gently. Upon remembering this unfortunate fact, my dad once again turned the knob, this time much more slowly, his hand shaking with anger and frustration. It worked this time. Bob's peaceful voice faded into nothingness.

When we pulled up to Coach Sherman's house, my dad immediately got out of the truck. I was a bit hesitant, but I knew I had no other option, so I opened my door and got out. Walking up the steps to his front porch, I imagined where the notes, the tape, and the other note may have landed. I couldn't see where Eliot and Sam had thrown all the shit, since I'd been in the Volv while they were doing it, but I could still imagine. Coach Sherman answered the door about ten seconds after the first ring of the bell.

"Evening, Sullivan. Evening, Eddie," he said in a tone of feigned politeness.

"Hello, Coach. My son here has something he'd like to say to you."

After a prolonged couple of seconds in which I weighed my options about what I could do in this situation, I spoke up.

"Um ... I don't have anything I want to say to him."

My dad's face now turned the hue of an overripe, bruised tomato.

"*What?*" he said. "You have something you want to say to Coach, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"Tell Coach *you're sorry*. Tell him exactly what you all did, and which of you all did it, and then *apologize*."

"I can't, Dad," I continued. "I'm sorry to you, for making you go through all of this stuff tonight, but I'm not sorry to Coach Sherman, so I

can't pretend like I am."

My dad stared at me in disbelief. I'd never seen him look so angry, at least not that I could remember. Finally, he averted his gaze from me and addressed Coach Sherman.

"Well, Coach," he said. "I apologize for my son. What he did was disrespectful and completely out of line, and the fact that he's not being man enough to own up to his mistakes now only makes it all the worse. I'm sorry. Genuinely."

"I understand, Sullivan," Coach Sherman began. "Kids will be kids. You two have yourselves a good evening."

"We will, Coach. Thanks."

As we walked down the steps of the front porch and back toward the truck, my dad looked at me.

"You're walking home. I'll see you back at the house." He got back into the truck and briskly drove down the road, his trucking kicking up fallen leaves into a swirl behind it.

It wasn't surprising that I had to walk, and I guess I deserved it. My dad didn't know that I really enjoyed walking, though. I always went out of my way to look for excuses to walk around town. It was relaxing to me, especially if I had my iPod. Then I could just stare at the trees and the sky while listening to music. I didn't have my iPod that evening, though, but it was still a nice night for a walk. It was a clear October night. October in central Kentucky, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the best months of the year. The weather is just about perfect. Skies tend to be clear and, though it does sometimes rain, it's mostly welcome, comfortable rain. And all of the trees turn bright autumnal colors. That was the type of night it was. On top of this near-perfect weather, the street I lived on was almost always totally quiet. Sometimes things would happen, I guess, like when we threw all that shit onto Coach Sherman's porch, but most nights it was an absolutely silent street. That made the walking even better.

As I walked home, I thought about who exactly the bad guy was in all of this. Coach Sherman was clearly a total dick and deserved every bit of whatever he had coming to him, but did that justify what we did? Regardless of the type of person Coach was, which was definitely a very shitty one, he was right in mentioning that he still had a wife and kid in there. Maybe Eliot's drunken note really did scare the shit out of them. If that was the case, did that make us bad people, too? What we did was certainly immature, we all knew that, but was it an objectively bad thing to do? We rationalized it by telling ourselves that we were getting back at Coach Sherman, or whatever, and I guess to some extent we were. But did the negative effect of how his wife and kid felt, and of how maybe the football players at school felt (I had no idea how they felt; they may not have given a single shit) negate whatever positive feeling the group of us got from this small form of payback to Sherman? It was difficult to decide. I was never good at determining the utilitarian value of things, anyway. Razorbeard had told us about utilitarianism during one of his lectures on different philosophical worldviews, and he said he didn't think that it made any sense. I agreed with him. It was too impersonal. That didn't change the fact, though, that what we did with the notes and the tape was probably an objectively bad thing to do, or at the very least an objectively pointless thing to do, from both a utilitarian perspective and just from a "don't be a fuckin' idiot" perspective. We were all worse than Judas Iscariot, that's for sure. At least that dude didn't really have a choice in the whole thing; he was just doing the dirty job that somebody had to do, that he was predestined to do, for the good of humanity. The positives of his actions outweighed the negatives. With us though ... we were just a bunch of fuckin' idiots.

That undoubtable truth made the rest of my walk home a little less calm and relaxing and a little more anxiety-inducing. I *deserved* a walk of shame. The narrow street leading to my house became the street leading to the site

of my execution (which probably wouldn't have been too far from reality if my dad hadn't eventually cooled off). Instead of autumnal leaves, the red, orange, and yellow colors above me were now accusatory tomatoes raining down in punishment upon my dumbass little head. The sounds of the evening, instead of crickets calmly chirping, were now a torrent of *boooooooooos* invading my ear space. The normally casual, breezy walk down the street became seemingly much longer than it normally was. It made me nervous knowing that I was a complete fuckin' idiot. It made me wonder what other things I'd done in life that were just as stupid as the notes on the porch thing, and whether or not I'd even realized how fuckin' stupid *those* things were. Maybe my entire life up to that point had been a series of dumb fucking decisions. Decisions that *I* didn't think were dumb, but that everyone else around me absolutely knew were completely idiotic. This realization very nearly caused a panic attack. As I walked through the front door of my house, it felt less like home than it ever had. It felt like a foreign place. From the look of it, my dad had already gone to sleep. I turned the corner into my bedroom intent on trying to do the same.

CHAPTER

Nineteen



FIRST FROST

I DIDN'T TELL ANYONE OTHER THAN PERCY ABOUT MY DAD TAKING ME to Coach Sherman's. I didn't feel the need to, and there was a chance whoever I told would take it to mean I ratted, even though we'd already talked to the principal about the whole thing. Percy was an understanding dude, so I knew he wouldn't be bothered by any of it. He was surprised I refused to say anything to Coach, though, which he expressed as we rode to school.

“Damn, dude! That must have been awkward as hell! You just stood there and didn’t say shit, then your dad made you walk home? Goddamn! That’s awesome, though. Might make things even more uncomfortable with old Sherman, but still awesome. Bet it drove Coach crazy – he probably wanted to see you grovel and pout, beg for forgiveness and whatnot. Bastard.”

“Yeah,” I responded, “I don’t give a shit anyway, though. I don’t care if I have to avoid making eye contact with or talking to Coach Sherman for the rest of the year. I’d prefer it that way, honestly. That way at least there’s no mannerly bullshit with the whole thing. We don’t have to pretend to like each other, you know? He doesn’t have to pretend to give a shit about me as a student, I don’t have to pretend to respect him as a teacher; I can just go about my business and ignore his dumb ass. It’s not like he has any control over my grades or anything, anyway.”

“Very true. Maybe I’ll join you in ignorance.”

We cranked the heat as the Volv trudged closer to school. It was an oddly chilly morning. The first frost of the year had spread across the Abrian landscape like flaky eczema, dispersing itself over the tops of trees and the hoods of cars. The grass, still not fully recovered from the dryness of the summer months, also was covered in frost, making for a crunchy step. Anytime you walked anywhere, it was like someone was following behind you, digging their hand into a bag of chips when your feet pressed against the ground. It would’ve been impossible to sneak up on anyone that morning – no running stealthily up Coach’s steps. Not that we didn’t get caught anyway, but you know what I mean.

Everyone at school that week was talking about Connie’s Halloween party that weekend. She’d decided to have it despite all the drama caused by Levi and his illicit photos. The party was going to be in a big field that her father, Mr. Montgomery – the head of the school board – owned. The field was totally isolated, completely out in the middle of bum-fuck

nowhere. It was surprising to me that Mr. Montgomery would allow his daughter to have a giant party. Seemed a bit sketchy. That's kind of how things in Abry went, though. If you had a little power, it didn't mean that you were a more responsible, hardworking individual, it just meant that you could do sketchier shit without anyone batting an eye. That's what was going on with this party. Mr. Montgomery would just pretend like he didn't know it happened, or something. And if that didn't work, he'd pretend like he was doing the kids a service by providing them a safe space to get wasted. Keeping them off the streets, keeping them from driving drunk.

My friends were really excited about the party. Not that they would do anything while they were there. We'd wind up going there, sitting on the hood of the Volv for two or three hours while listening to music and smoking cigs, talking, for the most part, to no one other than our immediate group, and then heading out, probably to go and do some more standing around at Cemetery Hill before calling it a night. We were an incredibly predictable bunch. Everyone was still excited about the party, though, which kind of caused me to become excited about it as well.

Other than the anticipation of the party, everything at school had calmed down quite a bit. We still talked amongst ourselves about the incident with Coach Sherman, but that was mostly just because it gave us something to discuss. Sherman and the rest of the school administrative staff didn't give a single shit about it anymore, you could tell. They'd all moved on with their lives. No one was really talking about Levi or his photos, either. Connie still thought about it all the time, I'm sure, but no one else gave a fuck about the whole thing anymore, at least not outwardly. Classes, as I'm sure you can imagine, weren't exactly interesting, either. We were finally preparing to read our essays in Mr. Tucker's class, after all those weeks of preparation. I was nervous to read mine. It was something I'd actually worked semi-hard on, which is something I can't say about much of my schoolwork. I'd actually put some real thought into this assignment. If I fucked it up, it

meant that I was a dumbass – I couldn't trick myself into pretending I didn't really try on it, not this time. There was some self-imposed pressure.

As I walked out of Tucker's class and began strolling down the hallway that day, I noticed Celia Quinn, Nate's girlfriend, arguing with Nate in the hallway. She was laying into him – really giving it to the poor bastard.

“Why wouldn't you wear one? You fucking idiot! You're always supposed to wear one!”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” Nate responded. “I guess I just forgot. Besides, I'm pretty sure you told me to stop wearing one. You said that it was better that way. We shouldn't be talking about this here, though. We really shouldn't.”

“Why in the fuck would I tell you not to wear one? You think I wanna' just be walking around these hallways carrying a fucking baby with me? Jesus Christ!”

Celia stormed off. Nate stood watching her go, looking dejected as hell. I walked up to him and patted him on the back. It wasn't supposed to be a patronizing pat, but I think it came off that way.

“What's the issue there, Nate?” I said. “Celia bitchin' you out for no good reason again?”

“Dude,” Nate responded, “please, just shut up.”

Nate slammed his locker shut, stared at it for a few seconds as if thinking about whether to punch it, and walked off.

That evening, we had youth group. Razorbeard was talking about deism. He said deism was impossible because it stripped God of his agency, of one of his most fundamental qualities: his personality. God, according to Beard, was a tremendously personal entity, one who cared deeply about the fate of everyone in the world. Every hair on every head and yadda yadda. Deism existed in direct contradiction to this personhood; it only allowed for a God who was a creator – an unemotional being. Someone who brought the world into existence but then, after that, just kind of stepped back and watched;

said fuck it. The Christian God was different because he cared about everyone personally. This, to me, seemed obviously false – one only needed to take a cursory glance at the shitty lives so many people have. Maybe I was being pessimistic.

Personally, I didn't think there was necessarily anything wrong with deism. I think I would prefer a God who didn't give a shit about me over a God who – though he might care about me – would still send my dumb ass to hell for eternity if I fucked up too badly. That's too much goddamn pressure. Everyone always said that the Christian God was a jealous God, and I could definitely believe that. I think that's always been one of my problems with Christianity: God cares *too much*, and it's not always in a Platonic sense. He's not always simply looking out for your best interest. Sometimes it's more a selfish sort of caring, where if you fuck up too hard and don't worship him good enough, like I said, then your ass is going to hell. I'd take a deistic god over that psychotic bullshit any day.

I noticed that Nate wasn't at youth group, which was strange because he was always there. It was one of the only ways he could simultaneously please his parents and hang out with his friends. Eliot noticed as well, because as we were walking out of church he mentioned it to me.

"Dude, where the hell is Nate? You seen him today?"

"Yeah," I responded, "but only at school, though. He was getting bitched out real hard by Celia toward the end of school today. He seemed pretty upset about it."

"Goddammit," said Eliot. "You wanna come with me to go check on his ass? I worry about him sometimes, and Celia can really get to that dude."

"Yeah, sure, I'm down. Let's go."

As Eliot's car – a red 1993 Mitsubishi Eclipse – climbed up Walnut Hill toward Nate's house, we rolled down the windows, inhaled some of that crisp fall evening air, and listened to music. On this particular evening it

was *Coney Island Baby* by Lou Reed. Kind of fitting considering Nate's life.

... *Wanna play football for the coach* ...

Nate's parents had this wiener dog who was one mean fucker. Anytime anyone knocked on their noisy aluminum storm-door, he'd come charging and start continuously banging up against the side of the storm door, just throwing himself against it – his weirdly large teeth bare, his angry lips quivering. There was even a huge dent in the door from all the times he'd smashed his chubby wiener body into it. He had a loud, surprisingly vicious bark that you could hear clearly from outside. His bark, combined with the rhythmic beating of the metal door, sounded almost like war drums and chanting. It was a terrifying fucking doorbell. The problem was, unlike most other dogs, he didn't stop after you'd been let inside and he saw that his owners were friendly toward you. He didn't give a single shit about that. He'd chase you all over the house. One time, I had to dive over their couch and onto the living room floor, subsequently sprinting up the stairs just to escape him. On another occasion, he actually bit Sam and took a big fucking chunk out of his leg. Dude had to go get a tetanus shot because of that. The dog was vicious. He never relented until you got up the stairs. He must've been too lazy to run up them. He was old as hell. I can't pretend I wasn't waiting for him to croak.

After Nate's parents let me and Eliot in the door, we did our best to sprint past the son of a bitch. We succeeded with minimal effort that evening, for some reason. The bastard almost got my leg, but then he gave up. Maybe he was tired. When we got up the stairs and opened the door to Nate's room, we saw something I'll remember vividly for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER

Twenty



REFLECTIONS

NATE WAS STANDING IN FRONT OF HIS MIRROR HOLDING A KNIFE. A BIG fucking butcher's knife. He was kind of smirking; he had a crazed, quivering rabid grin spread across his face. He was wearing only a pair of black basketball shorts, and nervous sweat beaded on his shoulders. His back still turned, he grinned at us maniacally through the mirror. I also saw in its reflection my own horrified expression.

“Hey, guys,” he said.

“Uh ... Nate,” began Eliot. “What in the fuck are you doing?”

“Oh, you know ...” he responded, still smiling. “It just makes me feel good to stand here like this sometimes. Don’t you ever feel like that? Just standing here, knowing you could end it all if you wanted to. If you really wanted to. It gives me power, reminds me that I’m still in control of this whole thing, I guess. At the end of the day, I’m the one calling the shots.”

A crazed chuckle escaped him. He quickly muffled it, red-faced, now embarrassed with the realization of what he was doing. He lifted his free hand and pulled at the curly hair over his ears as if to straighten it out.

“Well, dude,” I said, “though that may be true - you know, though, you are definitely in control of your life - you still may want to put the fucking knife down. I think that would be a fantastic decision. And what’s with the mirror anyway? You’re scaring the shit out of us!”

“I don’t know, man,” responded Nate, now visibly saddened. “Maybe I just like to see it. Maybe I just like to clearly see the power over myself that I wield. Nobody else had that power – only I do. Maybe it helps me deal with all the stupid stuff.”

Nate, still holding the knife, took one last look at himself in the mirror. This time, instead of the psycho grin he’d been sporting, he looked afraid. He appeared deeply worried. He dropped the knife, turned, and fell into the green La-Z Boy recliner directly behind him. As he rocked back and forth chaotically, the chair squeaking its disapproval, he said, “Sometimes it’s just all too much to deal with. I don’t think I would ever hurt myself, but sometimes the idea that I could is a stress reliever for me. Does that make sense?”

“Uh,” said Eliot, “yeah, man. That makes total sense. We’re just worried about you is all.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’ve just had a lot of stuff going on lately. My parents are always stressing me out, and then all this stuff with Coach Sherman and letting the team down.”

“Dude!” I interjected. “You didn’t let the fucking team down!”

“I know, I know,” Nate said. “That’s not really what’s been bothering me, anyway. That’s just a small part of the whole thing. You remember when you saw me and Celia arguing at school today, Ed?”

“Uh, yeah. She was really bitching you out.”

“Yeah, I know, and I deserved it.”

Nate continued rocking in his cushioned chair, now staring in dejection down at the carpeted floor. He then looked up at us, a look of hopeless terror painting his face.

“Celia and I found out she was pregnant last week. We went and got an abortion today after school. That’s why I wasn’t at youth group. She was yelling at me because I hadn’t been wearing a condom. She isn’t blameless in the whole thing, though, because she always tells me not to wear one, but she was still super angry when we found out she was pregnant, and I don’t blame her. I should have been more responsible. It just hurts knowing that I’m never going to be able to tell anyone about this, you know? Like ... clearly I’ve just told you all, but I’m never going to be able to mention this to my parents, like *ever*. They would never be able to look at me the same. They’d think I was an awful person.”

At that moment, I was trying to think of things I could say to Nate to convince him he was wrong, but he wasn’t. His parents – being the strict, God-fearing people they were – would disown him if they found out about this. There was absolutely no doubt about it.

“Well, dude,” I finally responded, “just don’t worry about them, okay? And try not to judge yourself too harshly for what you did. It was a difficult situation; you had to make a decision, and you did. You can’t live your whole life wondering about how much your actions may or may not disappoint people. That will just make you go crazy. Crazier than you already are.”

Nate started to laugh a little bit, though this time more innocently. “Yeah. I’m pretty nuts, huh?”

“Yeah, well, dude,” said Eliot, “whether you’re nuts or not, just don’t go raw-dog fucking Celia anymore. Make sure you wrap that little shrimp-dick bastard up, okay? It may only be two inches long, but it can still do its job.”

“Yeah, definitely. I’ll never do *that* again.”

We talked and laughed for a while longer, and then Eliot took me home. As I lay in bed that night, I began wondering again about the complexities of the life of someone like Nate. None of the important relationships in his life – whether ones he’d been forced into based on his family or ones he’s created himself – made any sense whatsoever. None could be reconciled with one another. None of them could truly coexist. That’s why Nate was so goddamn crazy. He had to put on a different mask depending on who he was talking to, and the masks he wore, whether he was forced to wear them or chose to wear them, were all completely different. To his parents, he needed to be a clean-cut, respectable, Christian young man. To Celia, on the other hand, he needed to be someone who didn’t give a shit about the rules, but who would also simultaneously do whatever she wanted him to do. To Coach Sherman and the football team, he needed to be a team player, someone invested in the success of the group. He needed to fall in line, respect the system, and refer to his teammates as *brothers*. To me, Percy, Eliot, and the rest of us, he needed to be a rebellious, immature shithead who made inappropriate jokes at the top of the bleachers before class.

The mask he wore for his parents and the one he wore for Celia could never coexist, and the one he wore for the football team and the one he wore for us, likewise couldn’t coexist. Nate, therefore, had to on any given day be four completely different people just so that he could keep the important people in his life happy. All of that was fine for him, at least externally, until Celia told him that she was pregnant. A baby threw far too big of a wrench in the whole thing because it compromised his multiple

personalities, especially the one that existed within the mind of his parents, which was the most important. There was no way Nate could continue – in the eyes of his parents – to be a standup Christian individual if they knew he'd knocked up his girlfriend. It just wasn't possible. They wouldn't accept it.

That made me begin to wonder about myself. Could I box up myself in essentially the same way I'd just categorized Nate? Did I put on different masks depending on who I was around? I was sure that I did, I just wasn't certain to what extent. Just because my own masks weren't as visible as his, though, doesn't mean they didn't exist. There was no way in hell I acted the same around Percy that I did with my parents. Hell, even amongst my friends I acted differently depending on who I was with. I felt, spoke, and acted differently when I was around Jack than I did when I was around, say, Eliot and Sam. I also acted differently around Nate than I did with the rest of them. Did that mean that I was crazy? Was it something I could help? I somehow didn't think awareness of the situation would cause it to change. You can't just cancel your anxiety. You can't negate social stress just because you're aware of its existence. My dad, for instance, clearly *still* felt some sort of social stress even with his own mother, whom he'd obviously known for his entire life. The things he said when she was there, and the way he acted when she was there, were different from the things he said and the way he acted when she wasn't. Hell, there was a time when he was smoking a cigar on our back porch, and when he saw her car pull up in the driveway he put it out as quickly as he could and began fanning the smoke away with his hand. If he, at his age, still did pointless shit like that, then I had trouble convincing myself that social stress would ever fully abate from my life, or from any sane person's life, for that matter.

If you don't have social anxiety, to at least some degree, then you're categorically psychotic. Not simply crazy, but the dangerous kind of crazy. Anyone who isn't at least a little bit afraid of everyone else is much more

likely to harm other people, and also much more likely to consider themselves better than everyone else. So it would seem that social anxiety is a necessity. I just needed to figure out how I could be *appropriately* anxious. I didn't want to be some narcissistic megalomaniac, but I also didn't want to have to stand in front of a mirror with a knife in order to feel powerful. I didn't want to be hiding cigars from my mother when I was forty-five years old. I needed to find the proper way to mediate between those two extremes. Life was tough back then. It still is.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One



CANNED TONIC

THAT WEEK AT SCHOOL EVERYONE WAS TALKING ABOUT THE UPCOMING Halloween party in Connie's field. Even the teachers knew about it, from listening to chatter in the hallway between classes. It made me wonder: If all the teachers gave so much of a shit about the safety of all of the students, you'd think they would make it a point to mention a huge field party – where all sorts of underaged kids were going to be completely shit-canned wasted – to the local authorities, or at least, at the very minimum, talk about

responsible drinking and whatnot during class. They didn't do that, though. They didn't give a shit about anybody – and why should they? They just wanted to show up to school each day, ramble on about their subject of “expertise,” and then go the fuck back home. I didn't blame them; I would probably be the same way if I was a teacher. Society didn't respect them enough – in the monetary sense of our beloved economic system of capitalism – to expect them to be heroes.

Levi didn't seem to be fazed by the fact that everyone was convinced that he spread the photos of Connie around school; he was still going to the party. At some point during the week, he walked up behind me in the hallway, gave the back of my neck a good hard bacon, called me “cuddy,” and told me he'd see me at the party. I didn't think it was a good idea for him to be going, but I also didn't give a single shit about him, so I just told him that, yes, I'd see his ass there.

Brooks had been avoiding us since the tape and notes incident. Either he was afraid of how pissed everyone would be at him knowing he ratted everyone out, or he just decided that maybe we weren't the best group of people to be hanging around all the time. Maybe a little of both. Regardless, he was right either way.

Eliot and Sam had been going about business as usual. Life was all good for them. I talked with Eliot a bit about the whole situation with Nate. We both thought it would be best for Nate to just get back to his life. Maybe that's *actually* what he needed to do, or maybe we just agreed that was what he needed to do because we didn't really know what to do to help the poor bastard. If we said we agreed that what he needed to do was just to get back to his normal life, then we could feel like we were doing something to help even when we weren't doing shit. It was a win-win situation for two stupid, lazy individuals.

Nate had been at school that week, but he'd remained mostly quiet. He still sat with us up in the bleachers, and he still spent his between-class time

getting yelled at by Celia in the hallway, but there was something definitely off with him. I guess it was understandable, considering the abortion and all. I'm sure it's impossible to truly understand what having to go through that type of thing does to you psychologically until you have to do it yourself. Like Vietnam, or some shit. Not really like that, but you know what I mean. Having that type of secret you have to hide from your family for the rest of your life is something that probably does nothing but weigh on you. It's got to be tormenting. I was glad that he at least felt like he could tell me and Eliot, but he obviously wasn't totally there mentally. Who's to say that anyone else was, either, though? Everyone is bat-shit crazy at heart, I'm sure.

Jack and Caroline had decided they were going to ride to Connie's party in the Volv with me and Percy. Maybe we'd drink some gin and tonics on the way there. The sketchy liquor store down the street from my house sold these canned sixteen-ounce gin and tonics – a blue can featuring an image of the British flag on it – which was great because they always sold to minors. As long as you had a bit of a beard – at least a couple of facial hairs – they didn't give a shit. Lucky for us, Jack had some respectable fuzz for a high school kid. The gin and tonics were actually good, too, and if you drank enough of them they got the job done.

Jack and Caroline had been fighting quite a bit lately, though that wasn't really all that strange. Jack was beginning to seem depressed about the whole thing, though. He seemed disenchanted with the relationship. He still cared a lot about Caroline, though – you could tell.

Percy was weirdly excited about the party. He didn't normally get very excited for those types of things, but this one really got him going, for some reason. I think it was because it was in a field and it was for Halloween. Percy loved horror movies, especially slasher films. He was crazy about John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Sam Raimi. I think the atmosphere of a dark field on Halloween night made him feel like he was in one of his

favorite movies. I could understand that; I kind of felt the same way. I was certain I would neither like nor care to talk to the vast majority of the people that would be there, but there really is something to be said about a car out in the middle of a field on Halloween night. The Volv was the perfect car for that type of situation, too. Maybe that's why Percy liked it so much.

On the last day of school that week, everyone was becoming increasingly excited about the party. As Percy and I walked out of school at the end of the day, shoving open the old, creaking heavy doors, we stepped into the warm sunlight. It was a nice day, perfect for October. The air held a little bite, but the bright sunshine still provided plenty of warmth. It was ideal. About halfway through our walk across the parking lot to the Volv, we ran into Jack, Caroline, and Connie.

"Hey, guys!" said Connie. "You're coming tonight, right?"

"Yeah, we'll be there," responded Percy.

"Good! It's gonna be a hell of a time! My older brother got us a keg! He and some of his college friends from Lexington are bringing it. They said anyone can drink it as long as you give them five bucks."

"Sounds good to me!" said Percy.

"Yeah! I've also created a playlist that's pretty amazing, if I do say so myself. And we're going to have hayrides around the field! It's gonna be a great time. Hey, do you guys know if Levi is coming or not? Have either of you talked to him about it?"

"Uh ... no," said Percy, "we haven't. Surely he's not that much of a fuckin' idiot. I doubt he'll come."

"You wouldn't think so, but who knows, he can be stubborn, and he can definitely be a big fuckin' idiot. Well, if you see him, tell him to make sure *not* to come. He's obviously not welcome. Not at all. I don't want my awesome party to be ruined by that piece of shit."

“Sure thing,” I responded. “We’ll let him know if we see him.” Clearly, I had already spoken to Levi just a couple of hours ago and deliberately chosen not to talk to him about the party, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Thanks!” responded Connie. “I guess I’ll see you all at the party then, huh? See you later!”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two



MODERN LOVE

THE BUZZ FROM THE THREE GIN AND TONICS I CRUSHED BEGAN TO SET in as the Volv wound through the curvy back roads outside Abry. Connie lived on Lincoln Road, the same road the school was on, but her house wasn't actually in the town of Abry; it was way out in the country. The curvy road, combined with the booze and sugar in the gin and tonic, made me a little woozy, but other than that I was feeling great. We were each clad in our Halloween costumes. Percy was wearing a turtle shell backpack and

a red headband. James was dressed as Teen Wolf. Caroline was Batgirl. It would seem, since Jack was Teen Wolf, she should've dressed as Boof. I guess that wouldn't look like she had much of a costume at all, though, so maybe that's why she didn't. I was suited up in prisoners' garb, with the classic black-and-white striped cap and everything. We were listening to *The Card Cheat* by The Clash at full blast. The HP computer speakers were working as hard as they could to fill the Volv with the static sound of Joe Strummer's hoarse voice.

"What do you think the chances are this thing gets busted?" yelled Jack from the back seat.

"Who knows," I responded. "Everyone at school has been talking about it. All of the school administration knows, I'm sure. Seems like the perfect party to get busted, if you ask me."

"Yeah," continued Jack. "That'll be pretty crazy if it happens. Imagine a bunch of cops just running through the field, trying to chase down hundreds of high school kids, flashing their tasers around and shit. I don't see how it would be very effective. Maybe it'd be effective at breaking up the party, but I don't think it would be effective at actually catching and reprimanding anyone for any sort of wrongdoing."

"Yeah, there's no way they'll be able to catch anyone. I guess if the cops come, we know what to do: Just run."

"Hey, now," interjected Percy, "if you all think I'm abandoning the Volv, you're fucking crazy. I'll just drive my happy ass out of there. If the party happens to get busted, you all should do the same and come with me. I'm not drinking tonight, anyway, and I don't think the cops are going to breathalyze every kid sitting in the back seat of a car. They're dicks, but they're lazy dicks. That's too much pointless work even for them. Caroline, you could just stay with Connie, I'm sure. If we happen to get into that sort of situation, that is."

“Yeah,” said Caroline, “I’ll just run up and hide from the ol’ coppers inside the house. That’s not a bad idea.”

As the Volv inched down Lincoln Road, we continued to discuss what we would do if the cops broke up the party. It was a productive conversation, I guess, considering that the chance it would actually happen was likely pretty damn high. Large parties in Abry rarely went off anywhere nearly as well as planned; it just wasn’t possible. On an average night, the police had very little to do other than cruise the streets hoping something interesting happened. If there was a giant party happening that most of the town already knew about, you could bet your fat ass the police knew about it, too. They’d probably cruise around Abry for the majority of the night and then, sometime a little after midnight, begin making their way over to the party pretending they got a call about it. They’d breathalyze a few kids, maybe cite a few of those over 18, and then call it a night. It wasn’t cynical or anything to think that’s the way things would go down; it was just the truth. It wasn’t even a negative thing, really, just a fact.

The dirt road leading to the field where Connie was having the party was pretty difficult to spot if you’d never seen it. If you weren’t paying attention, you could drive straight past it, which is exactly what we did. Caroline knew where it was, but she wasn’t paying a bit of attention as Percy sped straight by. She was spaced out, staring out the window. No one even noticed we’d missed it until we were a couple miles down the road, passing by the Lincoln Golf Club. Once we saw the golf course, everyone knew we’d gone too far, so Percy pulled into the parking lot and began turning around.

“Hey!” said Jack as Percy was whipping the Volv around. “Give me a second!”

Jack jumped out and ran up to the green of the eighteenth hole, which was close to the parking lot.

“What in the ever-living fuck is he doing?” said Percy.

“Who knows,” responded Caroline. “He likes to do some pretty stupid shit sometimes.”

As we sat silently in the Volv waiting for Jack’s return, *Cinnamon Girl* by Neil Young blared out of the windows throughout the parking lot. A few moments later, we saw Jack running back to the Volv. He had the flagstick from the eighteenth hole in his hand, holding it like a javelin.

“I’m gonna drill a road sign with this bastard!” he exclaimed.

Not the smartest idea in the world, but I was interested to see what would happen. As we sped down the few miles in between the golf course and Connie’s field, Jack stood up out of the sunroof, aiming the flagstick and waiting for a good sign. Not long after the Volv flew over the top of one of the steep “thrill hills” on Lincoln Road, a deer crossing sign came into view. Jack held the flagstick back with his right hand and used his left arm to balance himself and aim. As the Volv passed the sign, and without a second to lose, Jack launched the flag. It made a loud *CLANG* as it connected. Jack raised his arms in the air triumphantly and sat down.

“That, boys,” he began, breathing exhaustedly while lighting a cigarette, “would have gotten us a *whooooooooole* lot of venison. That was one big ass buck on that sign, did you see?”

“I don’t know, man” I responded, “I think I only saw four points on him, plus, the meat probably tastes a bit metallic.”

We all laughed as the Volv, this time, made the correct turn onto the dirt road leading up the hill to Connie’s field party.

Everyone who had thus far arrived was standing at the top of the hill. There was music coming from that direction, and a large wagon was sitting at the very top, which I correctly assumed would be used for hay rides around the field. The Volv, which was really struggling to make it up the hill through the dirt and mud, began spinning tires. Not long after, it was stuck.

“Goddammit,” said Percy. He was shifting back and forth from drive to reverse, trying to free the Volv. “I think we’re gonna have to push the ol’ girl out, unfortunately.”

“Well, *shiiiiiaaat*,” said Jack as he opened the rear door and began walking around behind the car.

I got out and joined him. Percy continued shifting gears, swinging the car back and forth like a Viking Ship ride at an amusement park. Each time he shifted from reverse back into drive, Jack and I pushed the back of the car, trying to help it out of the continuously deepening hole it was digging itself. As we pushed, the wheels of the Volv spun, throwing dirt and mud all over the both of us. I remember thinking that I was glad I hadn’t worn nice clothes that day, because they would most certainly have been ruined. I didn’t really own any nice clothes, though, or at least any that I really gave a shit about, so I didn’t ever have to worry about that sort of thing, anyway.

Eventually, on the eighth or ninth push, the Volv fishtailed out of the mud pit. Percy, briefly unaware he had gotten it out, kept his foot on the gas. The Volv peeled out of the hole and began barreling toward the hay ride wagon where people were sitting. Everyone on the wagon momentarily panicked. Drinks were quickly set down or spilled, people began scrambling to get off, and a few shrieked in horror. One person, Nolan Jones, stood as still as a statue, frozen with fear. His mouth was wide open and his eyes were bulging out of their sockets. I’m not entirely convinced he didn’t piss himself. Luckily, before anything terrible happened, Percy regained control. He slammed on the brakes and the Volv skidded to a halt right in front of the wagon. Mr. Montgomery, who was in the tractor the wagon was attached to, immediately got out and began walking to the Volv.

“Goddammit!” he said, power striding confidently across the length of the wagon. “What in the hell are you boys doing? You could have hurt somebody doing that! Could have fucked up my wagon, too!”

“Sorry, Mr. Montgomery!” said Percy as he hurriedly, frantically cranked down the window. “I didn’t realize it was this muddy up here. If I had, I guess I wouldn’t have brought this car.”

“Yeah, well ... it happens. You can park it over there.” He pointed to a place about one hundred yards away where other cars were parked. “After you park it, c’mon over and get yourself a ‘*cold*beer.’ Maybe I’ll take you kids on a little hayride here soon. That’s my job tonight, I guess. That’s what Connie says, at least.”

People in Abry liked to say *cold*beer as if it were one word, with heavy emphasis placed on cold. I’m not really sure why everyone said it, maybe it was just something that the town, as a collective socio-linguistic unit, had picked up somewhere along the road, but regardless, it was very common. I kind of liked it, though. It sounded better than just saying beer, I guess.

Jack, Caroline, and I waited for Percy as he parked the car and walked back up the hill to the party. Percy initially turned down the beer Mr. Montgomery had offered him because he was driving that night.

“You already drive like shit, anyway!” Mr. Montgomery said, pointing at the big ditch Percy had dug trying to get the Volv unstuck. “What’s one beer going to hurt you?”

“I guess you’ve got a good point,” said Percy, finally accepting the beer.

There weren’t too many people there when we arrived, but about thirty minutes or so after that everyone started filtering in. Eventually, I saw Sam and Eliot walking up the hill with Nate. Eliot was dressed as a caveman; he had a big wooden club and everything. Nate was wearing one of those huge jack-o-lantern suits you usually only see on young children. Sam simply had on some vampire teeth. It was good seeing Nate get out and do something after everything he’d been through lately; he definitely needed to try and relax. He and Sam were also drinking the canned gin and tonic. As they approached us, Sam tilted back the last of his can, crushed it, and chucked it into the mud puddle dug by the Volv.

“*Pick that shit up!*” came the immediate angry reply from Mr. Montgomery.

Sam, now blushing red all over, quickly ran to retrieve the can without saying a word.

“What do you say there, bitch boys?” said Eliot as he approached Percy and me. “I see you made a little bit of a mess on the way in, huh? Guess you should’ve just parked at the bottom of the hill like everyone else. Should’ve at least called and asked me how the Volv would handle this mud; I invented the *GAWD*-damn wheel, as you can see.” He spread his arms wide as if to show off his costume. “So I know how this sort of shit works.”

“Shut the hell up, dude,” responded Percy. “I didn’t see where everyone was parking before we pulled in. It’s not exactly very easy to see any of this shit from the road.”

Sam, now climbing out of the mud, his confidence regained, looked up at Percy. “It’s not *exactly* that *hard* to see either, you blind fuck!”

He walked to the big black garbage bag designated for cans, threw his gin and tonic in the bag, then turned to shake Mr. Montgomery’s hand.

“Sorry, Mr. Montgomery,” he said, “you won’t see me doing anything stupid like that for the rest of the night, I promise.”

As he turned away from Mr. Montgomery and began walking back to the group of us, an involuntary grin spread across his face. You couldn’t tell whether it signified that he was hiding something, whether he was just being a dick, or whether it was just some embarrassed, anxious grin he wasn’t capable of suppressing. Regardless of the reason for it, he looked like a fucking weirdo, especially with those vampire teeth.

Jack and Caroline had gone over to sit with Connie on the hay-ride wagon. Percy, Sam, Eliot, Nate, and I were all sort of just standing around talking. We looked even more awkward without having the Volv there to lean and sit upon. I could see why Percy had tried to pull it all the way up to

where the actual party was happening. Music blasted throughout the field from the makeshift DJ stand set up on an unstable looking wooden table. Connie had pretty good taste in music, so the playlist was solid. They were playing stuff like *I Melt with You* by Modern English, *1979* by the Pumpkins, and *Saturday Night* by Misfits. I could get down to that, if by get down you meant stand around and casually sip my beer. That didn't mean that I disliked the music, I obviously loved it; that was just the way that I was. We were all like that – too cool to dance.

After everyone had been awkwardly standing around long enough for Mr. Montgomery to begin feeling uncomfortable, he fired up the tractor and stood up on it, hanging off from the side like you see pirates do in movies as they set off for a long voyage.

“All right! We're taking a ride around the field! Anyone who wants to join better hop on the wagon!”

He threw the tractor into a low gear and began slowly rolling away down the hillside. Most everyone went on the hayride; the only people left standing around the DJ table were the group of us and some other random, faceless individuals. Now that we had our opportunity, we began crushing the keg beer as quickly as possible. Eliot even got us to stand him up for a keg stand.

“Take my legs, goddammit!” he yelled at me and Sam.

After we lifted him up, he began chugging. About eight or nine seconds in, he ripped the spigot out of his mouth. Beer spewed everywhere as he gasped for air: “*Shiat!*”

“Damn! You really suck ass at chugging beer, huh, Eliot?” I said, still holding up his legs.

“No, you dumb fuck!” he said, his face reddening from the blood rush. “Turn around and look who's pulling in!”

Sam and I put down Eliot's legs and turned around. At the bottom of the hill was Levi's car. After parking, he hopped excitedly out of the car and

began walking up the hill, a huge smile spread across his face. He was strutting up the hill at a brisk pace, flailing his arms back and forth as he strolled toward us. He looked almost the same way middle-aged women do when they power walk around town for exercise. If he'd had two-pound weights in each hand, he would have nailed it; it would have been a hell of a Halloween costume. He wasn't dressed as a woman on a walk though. He was wearing one of those big, full body frog suits.

"Ah, fuck!" said Percy. "We can't be caught hanging around that dumb bastard. If we are, Mr. Montgomery will probably associate us with him and kick out all of our asses! Plus, we won't get any more cheap beer."

"Very true," said Sam, the anxious blush again spreading across his face.

Nate, who was normally the most worried person out of all of us, didn't seem to really give a shit about the whole thing at all. He was standing nonchalantly against the side of the DJ table, his head right next to the speaker, as if trying to block out every sound other than the music. Before anyone had a chance to develop any sort of plan, Levi was up the hill and standing right next to us.

"Hey there, cuddies! Fancy seeing you all here!" he said as he immediately grabbed a red Solo cup from the stack sitting on the refreshments table and began aggressively pumping the keg.

"It's kind of like I'm spankin' my jack!" he exclaimed. "Not quite as rewarding, though. Almost, but not quite."

"Dude!" said Percy. "Don't you think you should get the fuck out of here? Mr. Montgomery is here, dude. He's taking everyone on a hayride right now, but he'll be back in a few minutes."

"Ah, I don't give a shit about that old bastard!" responded Levi. "He's not gonna do anything, and if he does, I'll whip that old ass of his! Besides, I didn't do anything wrong, so I shouldn't have to hide from everyone, you know? I can have some fun, too."

As he said that, he tilted back the beer cup and chugged the whole thing. Foam rolled down the side of his face and wetted his frog suit.

After a lengthy period of listening to Levi joke about how he could probably drink the whole keg by himself, we finally began to hear the tractor rumbling back up the hill. Levi, who up until this point had been his complete arrogant and sarcastic self, now began to look worried and uncomfortable. Mr. Montgomery spotted Levi well before the tractor made it to the top of the hill. The contented, almost sedated expression that had been previously inhabiting his face was quickly replaced by one of unmistakable rage. His eyes, calm and joyful only seconds before, were at once fixed into a glare upon which Levi was the obvious focus. Mr. Montgomery, you could tell, wasn't someone who wanted to be made a fool of, and he *definitely* didn't like anyone making a fool of his daughter. He considered himself a powerful man, everyone knew that. He was the head of the school board. He owned a big-ass farm and had lots of land. He provided more funding to the church than most of the other members. He, based on the way he saw himself, wasn't someone you could just fuck around with. If you fucked around with him, he was going to fuck you up.

The tractor moved slowly. This seemed intentional, as it could have been placed in a higher gear and scaled the hill much more swiftly. Maybe Mr. Montgomery wanted to give Levi one last chance to run away. Maybe he wanted to build within him a sense of dread. Who knows, but if the goal was to make Levi think about what he had done and about what was about to happen, it clearly worked. Levi had set down his beer and, though still trying to look cool, was very obviously horrified. He was bouncing anxiously from one leg to the other, like a boxer getting ready for a fight. He kept putting his hands in his pockets and pulling them out again. Then he'd rub them together and blow into them even though it wasn't even that cold. He repeatedly rubbed them against his pants to dry the sweat. He even slugged Eliot in the arm as if to show him that he wasn't afraid. Eliot

instinctively gave him a look of confused disgust, which should have told Levi everything he needed to know about what everyone thought about the situation. Levi still feigned confidence until the very end. That confidence, though, became more and more pathetic the closer the tractor inched toward deliverance of his inevitable doom.

When the tractor reached the top of the hill, Mr. Montgomery set it to idle and quickly got out of the driver's seat. In his hand was a cattle prod, which I guess he'd been using while on the hayride to move cows from out of the way of the gate. In his other hand was a full bottle of beer. He immediately began walking very deliberately toward Levi. At this point, the slow *chugga-chugga-chugga* of the idling tractor was the only source of noise in the area. The music had even, for some reason, shut off. Connie, dressed as a devil, was sitting toward the back of the wagon with Jack and Caroline. She jumped off and ran over to where her father was moving closer to her ex-boyfriend. She looked excited, almost elated, at what was happening. When she noticed the cattle prod in her father's hand, however, her elation turned more into surprise. When he used it on Levi, her surprise morphed into a sense of shocked terror.

"Hey, Mr. Montgomery, man," Levi began frantically as he stumbled backward away from the prod, "I just showed up here because I thought that I might as well, you know? I never did anything that should make me hide away from everyone. Everyone may think I'm just a—"

Before Levi could finish his sentence, he was abruptly kicked, by way of Mr. Montgomery's shit-kicker boot, into the mud pit dug by the Volv. He crashed hard into the pit as mud splashed all over his face. Before he had time to clear his eyes, Mr. Montgomery was already on top of him. Mr. Montgomery, who had temporarily sheathed his cattle prod, now used his right hand to choke Levi and press his face back down into the mud. He then took the beer in his left hand and began pouring it down Levi's throat. Levi flailed around, coughing and choking. It didn't do him any good. He'd

been gigged. He wasn't getting up until Mr. Montgomery let him, which at that point, no one was quite sure was going to happen.

Eliot, his hands now clenched into fists, seemed a couple of seconds from jumping on Mr. Montgomery to help Levi. At the last second, though, he happened to glance over at Percy, who gave him a disapproving shake of the head. Vexed, Eliot opened his fists and stood back, watching in startled anger.

"Don't you *ever* think that you can fuck with my family again," said Mr. Montgomery as he continued to press Levi's throat into the mud. "If you ever do anything like that again, you will die, and it will not be a pleasant way to go."

Mr. Montgomery finished pouring the beer down Levi's throat and tossed the empty bottle off to the side, hitting the DJ table. The table now began again, cranking out *Modern Love* by Bowie.

Mr. Montgomery got off Levi. Levi again began flailing around in the mud. He then, very frog-like, hopped up and started trying to run away. The mud, unfortunately, prevented him from doing that as quickly as he would have liked. He kept sloshing around awkwardly as he tried to remove himself from the pit. As he did that, Mr. Montgomery chased him, sticking him with the cattle prod. He did this for as far as he could chase Levi, as Levi scrambled away from the party and back toward his car.

"Party's back on!" Mr. Montgomery said triumphantly as he walked back up the hill. He had his arms spread, cattle prod still in one hand, as if to welcome each of the party guests, his herd, into his arms. After continuing this pose for an uncomfortably lengthy period of time (though even one second of it would have been too long), he trotted cheerfully back over to the tractor, which he revved up as loud as it would go.

"Who's in for the next ride?" he exclaimed manically.

Luckily for him, there was still a sizable number of partygoers who'd never left the wagon after the first ride. These unfortunate souls were to be

the passengers, likely against their will, on the next one. After the tractor had turned around and pulled off, Percy addressed the group of us.

“Well, fuck, boys! That crazy-ass redneck has very clearly shot completely the fuck off his rocker, so I think we should get the hell out of this place.”

“Yeah,” responded Eliot, “that son of a bitch is bat-shit crazier than fuck. Before we go, though, let’s chug a couple more beers for the road. They won’t be back from that hayride for another fifteen or twenty minutes, anyway.”

Other than Percy, who was driving and had already drank a few beers, we all took turns chugging from the keg. We then began making our way down the hill to where the Volv was parked. Sam, who wasn’t exactly the most alcohol-tolerant individual, tripped and went rolling down the hill. After he got up, and after everyone was done laughing at him, we noticed a pair of headlights pulling up the dirt road toward the party. From that distance it wasn’t easy to tell what type of car it was, but if you looked closely enough you could see that it was the cops. There was another one right behind the first.

Not long after they’d made it to the top of the hill, Mr. Montgomery’s tractor came rolling back into its parking spot. Mr. Montgomery hopped out of the driver’s seat and walked over to greet the police. Though it was impossible to see his face from the distance at which we were standing, he didn’t seem to be fazed by their presence. There was absolutely no hesitation in his step. After talking with the cops for just a few minutes, each of the officers got back in their cars and pulled off.

“Holy shit, they just left!” Sam exclaimed.

“Yeah, that didn’t take very long, huh?” I responded, “They were earlier than expected, anyway. Levi must have called them.”

“Well, no shit!” said Eliot. “He’d be a dumbass if he didn’t. We know he’s a dumbass, obviously, but I don’t think even he’s *that* stupid. That old

prick choked his ass out! Poured beer down his throat! That could have really fucked him up, man, caused some serious damage to his lungs and shit, not to mention that he's not already doing that with all of the cigs that he chugs. Hopefully Levi sues the hell out of his ass. That dirty bastard deserves it."

"That's not going to happen," said Percy. "For one, we're on Mr. Montgomery's property. Levi shouldn't have even been here in the first place. Secondly, and most importantly, no one gives a shit about Levi. That's not the case with Mr. Montgomery. He's got quite a bit of pull around town. He's rich. That's what it boils down to. Dude's got way more money than Levi. It's not very easy to sue someone if they've got more money, more credibility with local authorities, *and* more power than you."

"Very true," said Sam. "Well, I just hope that fucker gets what's coming to him one of these days. He deserves it. What do you think, Nate, you old bastard? You've been quiet as hell all night!"

"Mr. Montgomery won't get what's coming to him," responded Nate. "People rarely get what's coming to them unless they intentionally bring it on themselves. Not in this life, anyway. Maybe there's some after life where everyone gets what they had coming to them. Maybe Mr. Montgomery and Levi will both get what they deserve there, whatever that is. Maybe I will, too. But not in this life. No one gives enough of a shit about anything important to actually invest the energy to ensure that anyone gets what they deserve. I don't blame them, either, because I don't invest that energy, either; it just is what it is. Mr. Montgomery will be fine. Levi will, too. Mr. Montgomery probably thinks that he really got Levi good, sticking him with that prod and whatnot. He probably feels really good about himself. He didn't give Levi what he deserved, though. It's not like Levi learned anything from that whole experience. We all know he'll be back at school on Monday acting like just as much of an idiot as he always has. People

don't learn anything by getting stuck with a prod. They need something more than that."

"Well, goddamn, Nate!" exclaimed Sam. "You don't speak for the entire night, and now you're some sort of philosopher! Well, shit! You know, I think you're right, though. I definitely think Levi will be back at school on Monday acting like as big of a shithead as ever. This may even make it worse!"

"God, I hope not," responded Percy. "I don't know if I can take any more."

This conversation about people, how shitty most of them are and the nature of positive change, continued as the Volv scooted up and down the hills of Lincoln Road. After we'd completed our nightly ritual and gone up to Cemetery Hill to rip cigs at the Mercer grave, Percy dropped everyone off at their respective houses. As he was driving me home, right before he dropped me off, I suddenly remembered that we'd left Jack and Caroline at the party.

"Dude!" I exclaimed suddenly. "What about Jack and Caroline?"

Percy chuckled. "I talked to Jack for a second after the whole incident with Mr. Montgomery and Levi. I think Connie, or one of her brothers, is going to be giving them a ride home. Connie was pretty shook up after the whole thing and wanted them to hang around a little longer than I was personally willing to stay there."

"Yeah," I said. "I was ready to get the fuck out of there, too. People are crazy."

"Yeah," concluded Percy. "That's a fact."

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three



JUSTICE FOR JUDAS

LEVI DIDN'T SHOW UP TO SCHOOL THE FOLLOWING WEEK. APPARENTLY he tried to take action against Mr. Montgomery, but it never went anywhere. Percy was right, it seemed – nobody gave a shit about Levi. He didn't have enough money. Neither did his family. I'm really not sure whether his family even gave enough of a shit to help him seek justice against Montgomery. They probably didn't. I'm also not certain that Levi even deserved any justice. Maybe what happened to him *was* justice. A lot of

people at school saw it that way. High school kids always view themselves as older, wiser, and more knowledgeable than they actually are. They see themselves as adults. So, in most everyone at school's mind, Levi deserved to get his ass beat by Mr. Montgomery, even if he was legally underage, and even if Montgomery had forty years on him. I wasn't sure how I felt about the whole thing. They were both dicks, as far as I was concerned.

It was presentation week in Mr. Tucker's class. Tucker asked where Levi was and why he hadn't been attending class, but he didn't seem to be terribly interested in discovering the reason. He may have just been too lazy to give a shit about it; that would definitely fit with his temperament. He may have also already known what happened and just wanted to feign ignorance so the rest of us wouldn't discover his awareness of that fact that school board members could get away with beating the shit out of the students they represented. It didn't matter, though. No one expected Mr. Tucker to do anything about it.

On presentation day, Tucker waltzed into class with much more pep in his step than usual.

"All right, guys! You ready to teach us about justice being served?"

Tucker, rolling his shoulders jovially and wearing a look of crazed excitement, grabbed Nate's shoulder and began shaking it with an uncomfortable amount of force.

"What about you, Nathan? You're going to teach us about the Nazis, right? That's a classic topic! Why don't you go first?"

Nate also rolled his shoulders, though with clear anger and aggression rather than Tucker's habitual twitchy tic.

"Yeah, sure, why not," said Nate, apathetically arising from his desk and walking to the front of the class.

"Great!" said Mr. Tucker. He flopped into his chair and instinctively grabbed his newspaper. Once he remembered he was supposed to be

listening to presentations and couldn't read the paper, he awkwardly folded it shut and placed it back on his desk, a crimson blush apparent on his face.

Nate, who had been staring at Mr. Tucker throughout this fumbling display, waited for him to finish and then turned to the class to begin.

"Some of the Nazis got what they deserved," he began. "Hitler definitely didn't, though. He had too much pride to let someone else determine what justice being served would mean, so he killed himself. He served the justice he thought he deserved to himself. He even decided that his wife and dog deserved to go down with him, like some sort of Egyptian Pharaoh. He decided their fates for them. Not that they necessarily deserved a happy ending, either. The dog probably did, maybe, but the wife didn't. They didn't deserve to have Hitler decide their fates for them, though. No one deserved that. Not even Hitler himself. He deserved something worse. So in his case, justice definitely wasn't served."

Nate then looked around the room monotonously, seemingly unconcerned whether or not anyone was listening, then continued.

"A lot of the other Nazis ran away to different places, like countries in South America, I think. They didn't get what they deserved, either. A lot of them didn't even really get *anything*. All they had to do was leave Germany, which I'm sure they were happy to do by that point anyway.

"No one else involved in the war really got what they deserved, either. Not for the most part, anyway. Hirohito even got to retain his title. Keep living the palace life, and all that. What was up with that? Justice definitely wasn't served in that situation.

"And who was supposed to be serving up all of this justice, anyway? *Stalin*? Are we really supposed to see him as some sort of moral authority? An arbiter of *justice*? That might be the most laughable part of the whole thing. Everyone always pretends World War II was some clear-cut example of a battle between good and evil, but how could that possibly be true when one of the primary leaders of the alleged *good* side was *Stalin*? And it's not

like our American guys leading the fight were shining examples of morality, either. FDR threw innocent people in prison camps. Douglas MacArthur thought he was the emperor of Japan after the war. He had this creepy obsession with Asian cultures. Definitely not a healthy interest, either, that's for sure. Before his Japanese fetish, he thought he was some sort of king of the Philippines. He was a total imperialistic racist psycho.

“And Patton was somehow even crazier than him. That dude loved war. Loved it. The only thing he cared about in life was involving himself, in any manner he thought would be considered heroic, in warfare. He was horrified when the war started coming to an end because he was afraid he wouldn't have anywhere else to blow up. He wouldn't have any death to inflict on anyone anymore. He was determined to go fight in Japan after he was finished in Germany, even though he and MacArthur hated each other. Just for one last taste of warfare. Now that I think about it, he may have been the only one who got what they deserved in that whole mess. He wanted to die a hero's death. He thought it was his destiny, like Lieutenant Dan from *Forrest Gump*. Patton considered himself to be a past war hero reincarnated to change the tide of WWII. He actually thought he was *literally* Achilles, or Richard the Lionheart, or Napoleon reincarnated. Dude was *that type* of crazy. He definitely didn't get his hero's death, though; he got in a car accident on the way to a pheasant hunting trip. So maybe he got what he deserved. Maybe. No one ever really does, though. Not really.

“That Joseph Heller, you know, that guy that wrote the WWII book the school administration won't let us read, he probably had it right: no sane person would ever willingly involve themselves in war. To have a war, there are two absolute requirements: slaves and psychos. War is not possible without both of them. The psychos send the slaves to war, and then, when there are no more slaves left to send, or when the psychos realize that their particular group of slaves won't be able to kill enough of the other group, they become all saddened; twitchy with manic anxiety, until the next

opportunity to send more slaves off to die presents itself. That's the world we live in. It's always been that way, it seems. It is, unfortunately, the natural order of things. Slaves and psychos."

Nate, having finished speaking, looked up from his notes to the rest of the class. Some students may have been listening. Maybe. Many of them were sleeping. A few of them stared vacantly out the window. Some were doodling in their notebooks. A previously absent expression of annoyance appeared on Nate's face as he turned from the class over to Mr. Tucker's desk. Tucker was passed out. So gone to the world that it looked like he was about to fall out of his chair. His glasses had even fallen off of his face. The previously vexed expression on Nate's face then transformed into one of strangely cheerful contempt.

"Can you dance ballet, Mr. Tucker?" said Nate.

Mr. Tucker, not hearing a word Nate said, continued to snooze. Nate then grabbed a yard stick from off the chalk board and slammed it hard against Tucker's desk.

THWAP!

"HEY! TUCKER!"

Mr. Tucker snapped into wakefulness. In his startled state, he began involuntarily spinning around in his office chair, knocking over his cup of coffee and causing his newspaper to go flying into the air, each section separating and then floating back down like a squad of paratroopers soaring onto the beaches of Normandy.

"*YES?* Um ... yes? What do you need, Nathan?"

"*I said,* can you dance ballet?"

"Um ... what do you mean? I don't think that's relevant and uh ... things of that ... nature ..."

"I'm just standing here, having finished my presentation, with nothing really to do, so I kind of zoned out and started staring at you all peacefully passed out there. You look like someone who could really dance ballet. I've

been reading up on my history lately, as you know, and ballet was really popular in Nazi Germany. It was the type of dance Hitler liked best, because he thought it was well-structured. Now, you're not exactly well-structured. I wouldn't say so, at least, but you look like a guy who could really appreciate a good ballet."

"Um, well ... I don't see how this conversation is really related to our class."

"You only think that because you've been sleeping through the whole class. Say, do you happen to have a tutu under that big ol' desk of yours? If you do, you should slap that thing on, hop on top of your desk, and start twirling. I think we'd all really appreciate that from you. It's better than napping during your own class, at least. Do you have one?"

"Uh, no ... I don't. What do you *mean*?" Mr. Tucker's shoulder-rolling had shifted to a previously unimaginable RPM.

"Well, shit ... never mind," concluded Nate. It was the first sober vulgarity I think I'd ever heard him utter.

"Shit," he repeated. He then raised the yard stick once more, again slapping it onto Tucker's desk.

THWAP!

Tucker winced in confused anxiety. Nate then dropped the yard stick to the ground and walked out of the classroom.

"*Nate!*" Mr. Tucker shouted. "Where are you going? Class isn't finished! We still have more presentations to listen to, and ... things of *that* nature."

Nate didn't stop. He opened the door and left. After a minute or two, I looked out the window and saw him walking across the parking lot. He was completely checked out, you could tell.

Mr. Tucker, having finally snapped back into reality and realized that everyone was staring out the window watching Nate, jumped out of his chair and attempted to get the attention of the class.

“Hey, guys, eyes to the front of the room, please! I know that was quite an interesting little display from Nathan, but we still have a class to finish. Eyes on me, please.”

Unfortunately for Mr. Tucker, he’d spilled his coffee all over his pants, and a giant piss-like stain covered his crotch region. The class erupted into hysterical laughter. Luckily for Tucker, Levi wasn’t in class, so the laughter and heckling didn’t reach the apex everyone knew it was capable of reaching had he been present. Mr. Tucker, frantically looking around for something with which to dry his pants, grabbed at a box of tissues and began dabbing his groin in a panicked manner. After a few failed attempts to accomplish anything, and after realizing that he’d completely lost control of the class, he nervously power-walked out of the classroom and slammed the door behind him. After he left, the cacophony only intensified.

Mr. Tucker eventually re-entered the room, followed by the vice principal, Mr. Carrico. Mr. Carrico was sporting his standard strangely colored pit-stains, which matched hilariously with Tucker’s crotch stain. It looked like Mr. Tucker had pissed himself, unzipped his pants, aimed upward, and then pissed all over Mr. Carrico’s shirt. Regardless of this funny new development in the situation, the laughter nonetheless ceased almost immediately after Mr. Carrico entered the room. He wasn’t someone to fuck with. He was the type of guy who would give you detention, attend the detention himself, and personally make sure it was as miserable for you as he possibly could. Sort of like that old bastard from *The Breakfast Club*.

“*HEY!*” Mr. Carrico yelled more loudly than anything had probably ever been shouted in Mr. Tucker’s classroom. “You all need to sit down and shut up *immediately*. Just because one idiot decides to walk out of school in the middle of class doesn’t give the rest of you all permission to start a riot. Shut up *right now*, or else I’m going to deal with this personally, and no one wants that. You all don’t want it, and I don’t want it either.”

Mr. Carrico then turned to look at Mr. Tucker. “And you *definitely* don’t want it. Get your class in line.”

Mr. Tucker’s dreadful gulp resonated throughout the class. He looked horrified. Mr. Carrico then turned and left the classroom, also slamming the door on his way out.

“So,” said Mr. Tucker after he left, “we still have some presentations to hear. Ed! How about you speak next? Is that okay? You’re speaking about Judas Iscariot, right? What an interesting topic!”

His voice was so cracked and uneasy you would have thought that *he* had betrayed ol’ JC himself. This definitely wasn’t the environment that I wanted to speak in, but I also wanted to get my presentation over with, so I agreed. Standing in front of the class and looking out at the students, many of whom were still snickering and whispering to one another about everything that had just happened, I began.

“Everyone thinks Judas was the bad guy. He wasn’t, though, at least not in the way I see it. He was definitely a tortured individual, and it seems very possible, based on what I’ve read in the Bible, that he gave up Jesus for his own personal gain. But that doesn’t make him a bad guy; it *can’t* make him a bad guy. If he’s a bad guy, then the Christian religion itself is a bunch of bullshit.”

Mr. Tucker shifted uncomfortably in his chair at the word *bullshit*, but he didn’t say anything about it, other than an incomprehensible anxious murmur, and let me keep talking.

“And just to be clear, I’m not at all convinced that it’s *not* a bunch of bullshit, but for the sake of this presentation we’re going to assume it’s not, and *if* it’s not, then there’s absolutely no way Judas can be a bad guy. *If* the Christian tradition of belief is indeed true, then Judas absolutely *has* to be up in Heaven, ripping cigs with Jesus.

“The actions of Judas Iscariot, based on the Christian worldview, set in motion the most important event in world history, quite possibly the most

important event in the history of the universe. Regardless of whatever the motive for his actions was, the result was undeniably, overwhelmingly good. From a strictly utilitarian standpoint, he did an unquestionably good thing. Now, I know you're thinking that motives are important. Maybe you're thinking that motives are the absolute *most* important factor to take into account when judging the rightness or wrongness of an action, and trust me, I wouldn't disagree with you; I most definitely *do* agree with you. That's what makes Judas even more of an objectively good person.

"Judas' motive, from a purely psychological point of view, is impossible to determine. Some people think he was possessed by Satan, some think he needed some cash, and some think he was just an evil son of a bitch. Some people even think he was aware of God's plan and was trying to more quickly facilitate its completion. Regardless of what his motive really was, it doesn't matter. Judas's motive doesn't matter because Jesus *knew* what was going to happen before it even happened. Christian people always argue back and forth about predestination, and whether or not they think it exists. Well, in this case, it most certainly existed, because Jesus *said* that he knew it was going to happen. He *said* that someone was going to betray him. You really think he didn't already know who that someone was? He definitely knew; he just wanted to see how Judas would react. God has always been pretty sadistic like that. All you have to do is read the story of Abraham to figure that out. This situation isn't entirely dissimilar from that one. Jesus enjoyed watching Judas's reaction. That's what I think, and maybe that's the problem with God: always knowing everything has caused him to enjoy forcing himself to not know the answer to things, just for a little change of pace. Just so he can witness uncertainty. It's like people who go on a diet and sniff good food, just so they can at least experience it in some small way. That's what God was doing. That's what happened with Abraham, and what happened with Judas.

“Jesus knew what Judas was going to do, which means that Judas was predestined to do it, which means he had no true freedom to decide whether or not he was actually going to do it. That means that his motive, regardless of what it was, is completely unimportant. The only thing that’s important, at least as it relates to this specific situation, are the results, which were objectively positive.

“On top of all that, we know that Judas was completely grief-stricken by his own actions to the point that he killed himself. The Bible gives different accounts of what actually happened; either he hanged himself or burned himself alive, but regardless, he killed himself because of what he did! And he was predestined to do it! He had no choice in the matter, and he still killed himself because of his actions. What do you think Jesus thinks about *that*? Is that an example of something *good*? Is God capable of guilt? Because to me, it’s a little depressing that the series of events that the largest religion in the world considers the ultimate example of love and sacrifice was one involving premeditated death and subsequent suicide based on misplaced blame. I just don’t get it. Judas wasn’t a bad guy, though. You can take that to the bank. In his case, justice most certainly was *not* served. *Justice for Judas!*”

The class looked every bit as disinterested as I expected them to look. Even more disinterested than they looked after Nate’s presentation. Mr. Tucker, on the other hand, had been listening intently. He learned his lesson, and wasn’t about to snooze on the job again; at least not for the rest of the day.

“Very interesting, Mr. Marsh! And *very* controversial! I’d like to remind everyone that in this class, we’re accepting of everyone’s beliefs. I won’t allow anyone to bully anyone else because they believe something that’s a little bit different from the norm. Thanks, Eddie!”

The anxiety I felt about giving my presentation diminished, and the rest of the school day passed about as standardly as a day can pass. In other

words, it was pretty boring. Sam baconed Eliot in the hallway, then got his ass thrown against the lockers for it. That was pretty funny, but nothing else of note happened.

We did learn that Mr. Montgomery had been re-elected back into his long-held seat at the head of the school board, though. I didn't even realize that elections were happening that day. Good for him.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four



KARMA

LATER THAT DAY, THE VOLV WAS ONCE AGAIN PERCHED ATOP CEMETERY Hill in front of the Mercer grave. The L&M Red I was inhaling, drawn down to its filter, was beginning to burn my fingers, infecting them with that classic rancid stale smell. Percy was laying on his back on top of the narrow, rounded Mercer grave, with his arms and legs sprawled over each side. Jack, standing across from me and smoking a cig of his own, was talking about what happened after Percy and I left the party.

“Mr. Montgomery, that crazy ass, was in some sort of manic state. It was weird as fuck. I don’t know whether beating the hell out of Levi got him all amped up, or if he knew that he’d done something dumber than shit and was just trying to ignore it, or what, but that bastard was the life of the party. He was drinking beers with everyone. He was even encouraging people to do keg stands and shit. It was uncomfortable. Then, at some point, he just raised his beer bottle in the air, thanked everyone for coming, and stumbled back to his house. Connie, Caroline, and I sat out in the field on the wagon until pretty late; probably about three in the morning. Connie was really shook up by the whole thing. I think she was excited, at first, that Levi seemed to be getting what he deserved, but after that initial excitement wore off, she was more afraid of the realization that her dad could turn into such a crazy fuck. His drinking with everyone all night just made it worse. She’s going to be pretty fucked up by that for a while, I’d say.”

I took another drag off of my cig and stared out over the wonderful town of Abry. The many steeples lining the downtown area, from both churches and other buildings, made it look much older than it actually was. It was almost European-looking, if you thought about it hard enough. When you focused on them as intently as you could, really zeroed in on them so that everything in the immediate vicinity became peripheral, it looked like the smoke from everyone’s cigarettes was coming out of the tops of the buildings.

After realizing that I was zoned out, I snapped back into reality and looked over at Percy, still lying on the grave.

“You know, ol’ Mercer probably doesn’t like you just lying there on top of his shit like that. You might be pissing him off.”

“No, dude. You don’t understand the relationship Mercer and I have. He’s totally down for it. He fucking likes it. I’m like his fucking pet, dude. Think about it. He just spends all of his time lying down there without a goddamn thing to do. No friends to hang out and rip cigs with or anything

like that. Maybe he can communicate with some of the other dead fuckers, but who knows. Even then, that's probably not very exciting; they're just as dead as he is, after all. So he probably gets all worked up when we come up here, like a dog seeing its owner come home after a long day at work. We even talk to him and shit! Yeah, I bet every time he hears the Volv scooting up the hill, he's down there spasmodically dancing around, gleefully groaning, like the monster from *Young Frankenstein*, or some shit."

Not long after this strange description of Mr. Mercer's personality, we heard a car sputtering up the hill. It was Levi's car – an orange 1982 Chevy Malibu. He floored it up the hill and abruptly slammed on the breaks right in front of the Volv, their bumpers nearly touching. He hopped out, smiling, and spread his arms as if to welcome us into something. It was like he was Jim Jones and we'd just arrived at the People's Temple eager for some Kool-Aid. He then pranced happily in the air, landed, and froze, posing as if for a photo.

"Booooyyyyyys!" he said. "I figured I'd find somebody up here! I've been cruising around town all afternoon looking for someone to chill with! What're you all doing? Blasting some squares? Hell yeah!"

Levi pulled a cig out of his jacket pocket and lit up. After taking a healthy drag, he continued.

"You know, I'm sure you guys have been worried about me not being in school and everything. I know I haven't been answering the phone or anything like that, either. I'm sorry about that, boys, but I needed some space. I mean I *really* needed some space. I haven't done *shit* this past week, not a damn thing. Other than brood in my anger, man, my own bitterness. I was *marinating* in that shit, dudes. I couldn't stop thinking about ways that I could get back at that old bastard Mr. Montgomery. I'm still going to get back at him, hopefully sooner rather than later, you can bet your fat asses on that, but for the moment, I'm over it. I'm cool. What're you all doing up here, anyway, just shootin' the mutha' fuckin' breeze?"

“Uh ... yeah, man, basically,” said Percy. He was still lying on the Mercer grave, staring up at the sky. “We’re just up here thinking about the meaning of life and all that bullshit. Trying to answer the big questions and whatnot.”

“Well, goddamn! You don’t need to go thinking too hard about that! Just get yourself saved by my dude JC and you’ll be good to go! You’ll never have to think about that old bullshit ever again!”

“I don’t know, man,” I said. “I’m not sure how much faith I’ve got in JC. Seems like he fucked his boy Judas over pretty bad, based on the research I did about it for Mr. Tucker’s class.”

“What?” began Levi, so startled his jaw may as well have been dragging on the narrow blacktop road of Cemetery Hill. “Dude, you know it’s the opposite, right? Judas was the one who fucked over JC, not the other way around. You got some fucked-up back-asswards Bible or something? Maybe I need to let you borrow my copy.”

“I’m just joking,” I responded passively. “I did do my research project on that subject for Tucker’s class, but I’ve never really thought about it that much outside of that. Doesn’t really matter to me very much whether he fucked over JC or not, anyway. It’s interesting to think about, but that’s about it. I’m not really a religious guy, I don’t guess.”

“You’re not *religious*?” Levi exclaimed confusedly. “What the fuck does that even mean? What do you believe in, then? Bunch of nothing?”

“Um ... I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I’m still trying to figure that out.”

“You know, that’s going to come back to bite you in the ass one day, right? You can’t just walk around not recognizing the good word of ole JC! It’ll definitely come back to bite you in the asshole. Fucking karma, man.”

“You know the idea of karma comes from an Eastern religion, right?” interjected Percy. “That’s some Hindu shit; it’s got nothing to do with ol’ JC.”

“Yeah, whatever,” replied Levi. “All those other religions get all their shit from JC. All the good shit, at least, like karma.”

“Dude,” continued Percy, “I don’t mean to rain on your spiritual parade, but that’s just straight up not true. Hinduism, for example, is a lot older than ol’ JC. That shit was around way before he was even born.”

“Ol’ JC wasn’t *born*, dude,” Levi corrected, “he’s always been here. He just briefly lived on Earth as a regular-ass dude. He did that because he wanted to become human so that our pea-brains could understand him better. He wasn’t fucking born, dude, not in the traditional sense, at least. The Dude is eternal.”

“Well, whatever,” said Percy. He seemed to be nodding off, his head falling over the side of the gravestone. “Karma is a Hindu thing, that’s all I was getting at.”

“Whatever, boys. I’ve had a real shitstorm of a week, and the last thing I need is your dumbasses coming at me with all this sacrilegious bullshit. I’m out. See you cuddies later; I may come back to school next week.”

Levi walked back to his car, got in, slammed the door, cranked up the music (it was *Paradise City* by Guns N’ Roses) and hurriedly backed all the way down Cemetery Hill. As he pulled out of the cemetery and back onto the road, he had to slam on the brakes when he nearly ran over an elderly woman walking her poodle. She shrieked in horror and began angrily banging on the trunk of the car. Her wedding ring created a loud metal-on-metal sound that gave me goosebumps even from on top of the hill. Levi rolled down the window, shook his fist at her, and then peeled out toward Main Street, exhaust engulfing her in a black cloud.

“Well,” Jack said after he left, “at least the guy’s got some firmly rooted beliefs. He probably needs all the faith he can get right about now, considering how shitty his life is.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We shouldn’t challenge his beliefs like that. It’s probably healthy for him to keep them, at least at this point in his life. He

seems to really need the mental stability that ol' JC provides.”

“True,” said Percy, now lifting himself off of the gravestone, stretching both arms in the air, and yawning. “Maybe we’re dicks.”

“Yeah,” I concluded, “maybe. But it’s hard to decide whether or not you’re a dick these days. Who fucking knows.”

We each silently burned one more cig, then called it a day.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five



THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER

CHURCH WAS PACKED NEXT SUNDAY MORNING. THE WELCOMING double doors were open wide, letting in the brisk, fragrant November breeze. The bell tower noisily clanged away, signaling the start of another wonderful service. My family and I were sitting in our seats in the middle of the sanctuary. Mrs. Mudd was in her reserved place – in the row in front of us. She was alone. Mr. Mudd died the previous week. He drifted away peacefully in his sleep, I was told. Mrs. Mudd looked vacant. I said hello to

her, as had most everyone else who came into the sanctuary that morning. She didn't seem to care, though. She simply nodded and continued staring blankly ahead, up toward the altar. There weren't any tears in her eyes or anything like that. She looked completely emotionless.

Connie was sitting with Mr. Montgomery toward the back. I turned to look for her, and we briefly made awkward eye contact. She smiled at me as if she was only doing it because she knew it was expected behavior in uncomfortable situations. She didn't look very happy, either. She looked troubled, and not just because she had caught me looking at her. Her dad, who was sitting next to her, looked completely carefree. He seemed to be skimming the Bible as he laughed pompously, listening to his buddy, Mr. Lyman, animatedly ramble on about something. Lyman's hands were raised in the air, and he had a look of amused befuddlement on his face. I wondered what he was going on. I was sure it was something dumber than hell. A few moments later it became clear, as Lyman shifted his arms, previously raised to display his perplexity, into a golfer's stance. He demonstrated an air-swing, then raised his right arm in front of his eyes as if to shield them from the sun while watching his ball.

"It was a RACCOON!" he yelled, spit noticeably spraying from his mouth. "A raccoon! Stole my damn ball!"

He said that last sentence in a hushed voice, which was an irritating shift from his previous howl, so as to prevent anyone from hearing his use of vulgar language.

Mr. Montgomery snapped his Bible shut and fell into his widely spread knees laughing. He'd never heard anything as ridiculous as that in his life, apparently.

After the bell finished ringing and the organ finished playing, Razorbeard stood up from his seat behind the altar and addressed the congregation.

“Good morning, everyone, good *morning*! It’s a wonderful fall day out there. Praise the Lord!”

Everyone chirped like finches in agreement, as if a completely normal fucking day was some sort of cause for celebration. I guess it was, to some extent. I shouldn’t be so goddamn cynical.

Razorbeard then displayed a much more solemn, regretful presence.

“As many of you already know,” he began, “we recently lost one of the oldest and wisest members of our congregation, Mr. Mudd. Mr. Mudd was, as far as I’m concerned, one of the most godly and respectable people I’ve ever met. He was a true role model for everyone who knew him. He was modest, kind, and very obviously cared about other people more than himself. Those are rare qualities to find in a person. In dogs, maybe it’s common; but not people. Most people, or maybe not *most* people, but many people, have a natural tendency to think they’re better, or more important than everyone else. They think they’re more worthy of life than their fellow man. They’re self-righteous. Mr. Mudd, most certainly, was not this way, and that’s why I’d like to discuss this topic with you all today.

“Self-righteousness is something that comes completely naturally to people. It’s second nature! Maybe it’s something psychologically wired into us as a survival method; as a way to cope and get by in our hectic modern world. That may be true. It certainly feels like it is, at least. But self-righteousness has been around for a long time. It may be more prevalent now, but it’s been around for thousands of years. Jesus talked about it in Luke, which is where I’d like all of you to open your Bibles.”

Razorbeard then, as was his nature when he was speaking in front of a large audience of adults (he was much more comfortable during youth group), began shuffling uncomfortably behind the pulpit, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the red handkerchief he kept in his pocket.

“In Luke Chapter 18, Jesus tells the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisees, as most of you are aware, are not often portrayed

very positively in the New Testament. It's for good reason, I suppose, as Pharisees were well-documented as being critical of early Christians. Jesus regularly spoke negatively about them, and this parable is no different. In the parable, the Pharisee thanks God for making him unlike other, less godly men. He thanks God, essentially, for making him better than other people. The tax collector, on the other hand, asks for mercy from God. He recognizes that he is a sinner and asks God for forgiveness.

"The tax collector, as I'm sure you know, represents the type of reflection that Jesus looks upon much more favorably. Jesus said that it's important to humble yourself before your God. I think this is something most people have either forgotten or just don't understand. From what I can tell, it's just not possible for the average person to be naturally humble; it's not human nature. That's why we need to teach people how to be humble. We need to teach people how to understand that they're not better than anyone else. It's what the world needs more than anything. It needs it now, and it needed it in the past. This, based on my understanding of the Bible, is one of the qualities Jesus thought was of the utmost importance to develop within oneself. It's the only way anyone can truly understand themselves, and the only way anyone can truly empathize with others.

"I also want everyone to turn their Bible to Proverbs Chapter 30. If you all take one thing from this sermon today, I want you to take this verse. Remember it, and pray on it later. Proverbs 30 verse 12 says:

"There are those who are clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth.

"This is something I would like everyone to reflect on this week. Think about whether or not you have thought yourself spiritually clean, and if you have, think about this verse, and think about the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Of those two, who are you? Are you the Pharisee? Someone who has allegedly devoted their life to the service of God but who is still incapable of recognizing their own sin? Or are you the tax collector,

someone who has lived their life in sin but who understands the mistakes they have made and seeks forgiveness for them?

“I often think about myself and can’t help but think that I’m the Pharisee. I stand here in front of all of you every week and pretend I know the nature of God. I give you advice, as if life is something with which I even have any real experience. I don’t have any experience. I’m too young. I don’t have a family. When it comes to helping people, I’m just winging it most of the time. I pretend to be such a caring person, but the only reason I really do that is because pretending to be a caring, godly person makes me *feel* that I’m actually caring and godly. I’m just tricking myself into believing I’m something I’m not. I’m going to keep trying to better myself, though, I can promise you that, and I hope you all will join me. I am *not* self-righteous, and I will do anything to develop into the type of person that God needs me to be.”

After this confession, most everyone in the congregation, as they always did whenever the sermon became a little too personal, began shifting uncomfortably in their pews and looking around at everyone else. Honesty made people at Abry Presbyterian Church more stressed than just about anything else. I can’t say much, though, because I was doing the same thing. My head was twitching back and forth like a flustered squirrel. I’m not sure whether I was doing it because I also was uncomfortable or just because I knew that the reaction in the pews to Razorbeard’s emotional sermon was going to be interesting. Probably a little of both. I was, after all, raised as a member of that goddamn place, so I’m sure their social filth rubbed off on me quite a bit.

Sam seemed to be playing around with his brother. He likely hadn’t paid a single bit of attention to the sermon. A bit fucked-up considering Razorbeard had been a pretty good friend to Sam. The least the bastard could do was pretend like he was paying attention. Show some goddamn respect and whatnot. Mr. Lyman was looking around the congregation with

a jittery, anxious grin on his face, as if to say: *This isn't acceptable, is it? We're not supposed to be cool with people pouring out their heart to us, it's not polite!*

Mr. Lyman was, in many ways, an exemplary member of Abry Presbyterian Church. There wasn't much going on for him upstairs, but he appreciated the church because it gave him something to do and it was part of his established understanding of social culture, the preservation of which was to him the absolute most important thing in the world.

Mrs. Mudd was every bit as void of emotion as she had been before the service. She was still staring absently ahead toward the altar. You could almost feel the nothingness in her gaze. She didn't move for the rest of the service, as a matter of fact. I'm pretty sure she was still sitting there like that when I walked out of the church.

Mr. Montgomery was sitting in the back row smiling. His hands, politely folded, rested on the Bible in his lap. Nothing ever fazed that old bastard.

The rest of the service continued about as monotonously as a church service can progress. People stood up, sat down, sang, sipped grape juice, and politely dumped their money into a basket. The rest of the day wasn't much different. It was boring, I'm pretty sure.

EPILOGUE



PEOPLE ARE TAUGHT THAT STORIES REFLECT REALITY, AND THE NATURE of the story is good battling evil. This dichotomy provides comfort — it's good to know you're part of the good team, that you participate in true morality. But does true morality exist? Is it possible to measure people as good or bad, as moral or immoral? Or is it better to simply reflect on their deeds at present and conclude judgment continuously thereafter?

In Abry it seems the latter would be preferable.

No one is always good. No one is always bad. Even the most vile of monsters do favors for those they love from a place of kindness. People change, and their character is reflective of their actions on any given day — not on their life as a whole. Personality isn't concrete — it's gelatinous. Morality exists only relative to group consciousness, and group consciousness is created by culture. Culture, too, is gelatinous.

The church in Abry battled with this. Razorbeard, specifically, fought with it. Though something fundamental in the character of his congregation needed to change, he was well aware of his inability to manufacture that change. He didn't command the influence required to craft culture.

Culture is far stronger than truth.

Culture is stronger than morality. Religion is part of culture, so religion, too, is stronger than morality.

The congregation of Abry Presbyterian, as with those at St. Aloysius Catholic, as with those fans at Abry High watching the football games, change themselves by situation in order to adjust with changes in their current micro-culture. Abry, though possessing a specific, unique culture, contains within itself also numerous subcultures to which citizens must adjust as they navigate town.

If a middle-aged man — Sullivan Marsh, for example — goes to an Abry High football game on Friday night and then later the same weekend attends Abry Presbyterian Church, he must adjust his beliefs, behavior, and language to better mirror the expectations in the micro-culture of each place.

It is human nature to constantly subconsciously adjust belief systems, morals, and culture in order to better fit in with whatever social group is present. Those who can do that effectively are likely to be more evolutionarily successful than those who cannot.

Levi Wagner didn't obey the unspoken rules of his species when he attended Connie Montgomery's field party. He chose to insert himself into a

culture that had shunned him. Coach Sheridan and Mr. Montgomery — though grown adults of similarly distasteful character — were still accepted because they were creators of culture; two of the integral spokes upon which the cultural wheel of Abry revolved.

The inhabitants of a culture respect those who provide excitement and newness to the culture, though that newness must still function within preconceived subconscious cultural rules. A difficult task. A culture, therefore, cherishes those who first understand and thereafter create the culture itself. If those creator individuals do something allegedly immoral — even if this uncouth act is something deemed religiously evil by those within the culture — the populace of the culture will still sometimes brush it aside because that person is one who creates. If one creates culture, they are mostly immune to moral criticism so long as the product of their creation outweighs the severity of their immorality.

What does that mean for our Abrian heroes? Where do I fit into this? Where do Percy, Jack, and Eliot fit in? Where does Nathan Keaton fit in?

What about Mr. Tucker?

What about Connie Montgomery?

Perhaps the purpose of adolescence is familiarizing oneself with the rules of a culture and then practicing participation within that culture. That's the way I see it. That's what we were doing — me, Percy, Sam, Elliot, Brooks, Nathan — testing how far we could bend the existential edge of the culture before it snapped back and struck us. Some have a more difficult knot to untangle with regard to this. Nathan Keaton, for example, had to discover a method of interweaving numerous contradictory micro-cultures in a way that would satisfy all of them. I think he did a pretty good job of that, though it may have happened at the expense of his youth, and perhaps at the price of part of his sanity. Others fought battles more purely inward, more obviously psychological in nature, such as Brooks. How can one live up to a persona — one crafted by the members of the culture as a

byproduct of preconceived notions of personality — requiring brutishness, or aggressiveness, when that isn't actually the true personality. Brooks had to find a way to do his job within the culture while also facing his internal fears and uncertainties. Maybe he didn't want to play the part given him; or maybe he did, but he wasn't very good at it. Either way, his fight was from within.

Others have a less difficult time managing the stress and anxiety and attempting to fit into a culturally assigned role. Some are capable of denying strict roles in favor of broader social freedom. Percy, Sam, and Elliot fit into this group. They were more explorers than anything else, bored with the boundaries of life in Abry, itching to escape into the open ocean of life. This personality type provides more self-acceptance, though also often breeds culturally destructive acts, such as those with the sign at the weight room, or the digging up of the notes. Those who don't want to participate in culturally constructed social roles are likely also to be those who damage the structural integrity of the culture itself. This is usually only problematic long-term if those renegades are afraid or unable to distance themselves from the culture and refuse to change.

Jack Luther was unique in that he wanted both to play his cultural role and also rebel against the culture. He wished simultaneously both to fit-in and escape. Like Brooks' situation, this is an internal battle which must be reconciled from within.

Mr. Tucker could in some ways have the most difficult battle of all. A knowledgeable teacher, though by no means committed to working hard for the education of his students, he had long since burned out. What could he have done in such a situation, when neither failure nor success are present, when one exists in a sort of lethargic, apathetic limbo in which there is no apparent relief. This is the battle Tucker seemed to be fighting, one made no less easy by the daily presence of jabbering rebellious teenagers.

And what about Connie Montgomery? A natural rebel though the daughter of a well-established culture-creator. What decision is to be made when one doesn't accept the culture forged by their family? Should one rebel against their own family or force themselves to integrate? There likely is no correct answer to this question, though that is what Connie Montgomery was likely dealing with.

I, myself, am also split, perhaps in a manner not entirely dissimilar to that of Jack. I love Abry; such a concrete small-town culture in a way for me affirms existence. Meaninglessness is somehow swatted backward amidst the constant creation of unique culture. Paradoxically, however, the strictness of this culture is also that which makes escape preferable. A small town needs a strictly-adhered-to local culture — that's the only way moral meaning and shared existence can exist between its residents — but strict rules also inevitably foster rebellion as well as corruption. Mr. Montgomery could never be ousted from his position on the local school board; Coach Sheridan couldn't be fired from his job as head football coach. It's too difficult to uproot tightly planted individuals from within a culture. If the culture itself is incapable of seeing these individuals as rotten, it too is impossible to weed them as their toxic existence has too well poisoned those adjacent to them.

I could never leave Abry totally behind, though — I would never. But I can't say that moving away for college didn't provide a wave of relief.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Pettus is an English as a Second Language teacher at the University of Cincinnati. His short stories have been featured in *Mystery Tribune*, *The Horror Zine*, and others. Several of his stories have also been narrated on podcasts. *Abry* is his first novel.

When he's not writing, he enjoys throwing darts, playing board games, cooking, watching basketball and football, and sitting around a fire.

Robert lives in Kentucky with his wife Mary, and his pet rabbit, Achilles.



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