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hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
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This work and its defense approved by:

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The Gospels of Faith and Doubt: A Novel

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Abstract

*The Gospels of Faith and Doubt: A Novel* explores the relationship between knowledge and belief. The narrator, Thomas Miller, tells the story of his best friend from childhood, Adam Ellison, who claims to be the second son of God. Though Thomas doubts the existence of God, much less Adam’s divinity, from an intellectual perspective, often he feels an instinctive, emotional pull toward faith. To reconcile these contradictory views, he writes the story of Adam’s life in two parts: one as a straightforward biography or memoir, the other as his own Gospel version of Adam’s life. With that structure in mind, the novel carries forward the structural interests of such novels as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and Steven Millhauser’s *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943–1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright. That dual structure allows me to merge two diverse traditions of fiction: the realistic and the speculative. Merging those traditions enables the novel to investigate the relationship between one’s experience of life and one’s interpretation of the mystical events of Christian texts.
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January 10: The Books

I’m writing two books. One I’m going to burn; the other will change the world. Either way, it’s time people knew the truth about Adam Ellison, the second son of God.

I don’t know which book is which. One is a gospel, the good news of Adam, what I want desperately to believe. I should also confess to you that for much of my life, I’ve had no faith in God. Not that I haven’t wanted to. But as little as I do believe, when I write Adam’s gospel I’m inspired akin to Saint Matthew receiving the word. My breath seems more tangible than vapor; the words make sense. Even if I can’t believe, I can write as if I do.

But there is the other book, the one that’s fact. If Adam’s followers want a messiah, they need to know what they're praying (and paying) for. Other than the ridiculous miracle of his birth, which his mother fed him, he’s never claimed what others profess him to be. He speaks, people listen; he walks, people follow. After that, they make him what they want him to be: prophet, messiah, the Word itself.

I started writing these books after my father’s funeral, the first hour I got home. Adam is responsible for his death, my mother’s too. He may not have had his hand on the throat, but he had that other bludgeon, his voice.

What’s worse, if Adam is responsible for my father’s death, I don’t know whether I’m angry or not. Because—and this is the confession that keeps me up at night—I want very deeply to believe in Adam. Not necessarily that he’s the Messiah they claim, but that what he preaches is true. I want to trust some God’s out there watching us, listening when we whisper, listening when we don’t.
And my parents’ deaths aren’t the only ones Adam is responsible for. In the summer of 2000, a man long homeless walked into a Cleveland shelter, where he ate a meal of soup and cornbread, and took a shower. He told everyone who would listen that he was the happiest man alive. Those familiar with him, volunteers and employees and regulars, knew him to be unstable, manic-depressive, but as he shared his joy his demeanor was a smiling calm. Later, everyone who spoke to him reflected on how happy they’d been in his company that evening, especially compared to how uneasy he usually made them, experienced as they were with agitation. People asked him the secret of his happiness, and he said, repeatedly, “I am myself. I’m in control.” The next morning, police discovered him hanged from a bridge by his belt. All they found in his pockets was a note on shelter stationery that read, in neat script, “Thank you Adam.”

In the fall of 2001, an accountant named Terry Becker leapt from the 90th floor of a burning building to his death. That night, Adam Ellison appeared at Becker’s apartment and spoke with his widow, Alison, for hours. The content of that conversation remains unknown. Three days later, when media asked how she was, she replied, “He’s okay.” Did she understand he was dead? She nodded. “I know that. But he’s okay.” A year past the interview, after she transferred custody of her children to her husband’s brother, she shot herself. Friends who’d met her for coffee the day before her suicide said they’d never seen her more peaceful.

Two weeks after his wife succumbed to cancer, one day into the new year of 2002, a middle-aged physics professor took a lethal combination of sleeping pills and anti-depressants. He had known Adam Ellison all of the latter’s life and took Adam’s counsel after his wife’s death. A letter he wrote and mailed the day of his death asked his son, not for forgiveness, but for understanding that his suicide was right. That it was good.
The suicides share two things: the counsel of Adam, and an indication that the choice of suicide was, for the victim (though victim is, in their own perspective, the wrong word), a positive one. He denies having told anyone to take his or her life, and investigations into him and his followers have dredged up nothing conclusive, no matter what the rumors say. He has been hailed variously as a savior, a huckster, a prophet, a murderer, a martyr, a confidence man. He may be all and none of those. My biography purports to tell his life story. Nothing more, nothing less.

And Adam will be responsible for another death: his own. If everything goes according to his plans, he dies in less than two weeks, on January 23. Thanks, in part, to me. I won’t hold the weapon, but I’ll make sure, according to Adam’s instructions, he’s in its way.

I don’t know if he’s always planned it that way. I’m the only person who’s known Adam all his years, other than his mother, and she’s not talking. If you examine the newspaper photographs or the videos of him leading the masses, my face is a blur behind him. Even from childhood, I’ve always been the blur made in his image. In the pictures of us, he stands out. I’m a sidekick. But I’ve watched up close, and I can be honest and fair.

I’ve heard and told so many stories about him, including the ones he tells, that I suspect there are as many Adams as stories. When I’m alone and my mind is prattling on, I see him not as he is or was, but in his various incarnations. As I write about his childhood, memories do the Lazarus thing, appearing from behind the stone of experience, ragged and rotten, only to pass again. It can be hard to tell what’s wheat and what’s chaff.

I had to steal one of my mother’s photo albums. I think of them as my mother’s—she organized them, she brought them out for guests. My father’s photographs were no help to my memory.
Imagine what it’s been like for all those Christian iconographers. Jesus in the manger always seems like a ridiculous generic cherub to me, but the adult Jesus figures like that framed poster in First Methodist back home. With his eyes rolled up, he looks bored, not agonized. I even think of Jesus as Willem Dafoe in *Last Temptation*, or as that vaguely Hispanic hybrid I imagined when I learned Christ wasn’t white. Adam morphs like that for me.

I would love to believe, I truly would. Though it’s not faith I desire so much as the ability to let faith be. “Are you listening?” Adam would say. “Don’t you have ears? Don’t you have eyes?” Yes, Adam, but those are the problem.
January 8: The Dawn of Christendom

Before the word, there was the sound—idiot and awkward, the child’s first cry, the sign of everything to come. The delivering doctor, Irvin Reid, claimed he’d heard nothing like it; that was the newspaper article’s lead. A cub reporter waited at the hospital to cover the birth of a senator’s child. Hearing the scream, which echoed as if delivered into the pipes above and below, the reporter ran down the hall after nurses in scrubs and tennis shoes, past empty beds and an idle baby ventilator to find a delivery nurse, arms in the air, trying to calm the crowd. Her hands were pale from the just-removed cocoons of rubber gloves. “It’s okay,” she said, “only the loudest newborn ever.” No one could say precisely how long the cry had lasted, probably no more than ten seconds, but baby Adam proclaimed his existence long enough to implant the fear of some emergent Armageddon into the maternity ward, the outpatient wing on the floor below, and the hospital chapel on the floor above.

So the myth began, with a single-column story on page B3 of the state newspaper. “Healthy Baby Alarms Hospital.” The article was cut out and glued to card stock in a memory book, where it yellowed and cracked at the edges, facing a Polaroid of June Ellison holding Adam in her arms. No wise men, no camels, no stars. Adam has claimed several times over the years that he remembers his birth and his scream. If you ask him about it, he closes his eyes, breathes barely audibly, then flinches as if jerking awake. “I still remember that sound,” he says. “Like a hurt dog.” It’s a good act. I’m never sure I believe him.

But my parents remembered his scream. They were down the hall, where my pregnant mother remained impatiently, a finished crossword book and a dog-eared paperback of *Great Expectations* on the table beside her bed, a persistent itch outside her armpit from the ballooned
paper gowns she wore while waiting for me to make my first entrance—and my first exit. My father graded Intro to Physics exams, stifling his judgmental harrumphs, something he was never good at. I was over a week late, and they waited for inducement. My parents told me, separately of course, how difficult it was as the due date crept past, how they worried for my health and my mother’s, how they each imagined me fully grown and cramped in her belly.

Then the miracle: Adam’s scream sent my mother into labor. Luckily, a nurse sprinting toward Adam heard my mother’s scream, and I came quickly, following the crowd to Adam’s call. I like to think I recognized Adam’s infant glossolalia from his initial scream, the imprimatur of my existence. I don’t think I’m giving him too much credit.

I, by the way, was born Thomas Robert Miller, a name as plain as can be.

Birth is such a common miracle; in life, we are already in the midst of death. That’s the trouble of miracles, their deception. That poor bastard Lazarus had to be brought back to suffer the sins of the body all over again—but worse, in a body he barely knew, warped and worn from three days in a cave. Christ was such a sucker for suffering he forgot the pleasures of the dead.

Adam’s mother was June Margaret Markham Ellison; his father was unknown. John Doe, the birth certificate reads. Appropriate, given that God, if he or she or it exists, is anonymous. To my knowledge, she never told anyone who the father was, and when asked, she said her husband was not the father.

Yet she named Adam, in part, for her estranged husband, Daniel Adam Ellison, who left when he learned June was pregnant. Shy of midnight, he backed into the garbage cans he’d put out earlier in the evening, spilling into the street the detritus of his newly past life. My father cleaned it up. He was outside smoking, he confessed to me when I was fifteen. For many years he had smoked secretly. “Don’t tell your mother,” he said. “Or tell her. I don’t care.” (When I
told her, she already knew.) He overheard shouting from the Ellisons’ house next door. Even after he’d stubbed his cigarette and hidden it under a flowerpot, he listened as Daniel yelled, “I don’t give a damn! I don’t know you at all!” Minutes later, he was gone.

People forget, but early in the Gospel of Matthew, when Joseph learns Mary is pregnant, he thinks of leaving quietly to avoid exposing her, “unwilling to put her to shame.” For this, he is a “just man.” But a messenger of God tells him in a dream that Mary has not betrayed him, that he should serve as Christ’s legal father because the holy spirit is responsible for the child’s existence. And maybe my favorite part: he “knew her not until she had borne a son.” What a head job. The things people will do for dreams.

I’m guessing June’s husband didn’t have that dream, or he had it too late. I imagine him later the night of his departure. He’s asleep on the thin, paisley Comforter of a cheap motel, and the messenger who stayed Joseph visits. Daniel bursts from sleep, packs his suitcase, and wakes the manager so he can check out and drive back to his wife. The messenger flits in Daniel’s wakened head as he pulls onto the interstate and scans FM for anything to listen to. He blinks against his exhaustion, trying to hold onto the compulsion to return, but with his brain composed of radio static and the blurry echoes of green exit signs in the dark middle of nowhere, he comes to his senses and grows angry at himself for acting so rashly on a dream, remembering June’s infidelity and waking up another motel manager so he can sleep off his irrationality and stay out of her life forever. I imagine him fingering the gilded pages of a Gideon’s and telling himself he’ll return if the messenger comes again. But the dream doesn’t come back, and neither did he.

I have no clue what he looks like. Adam’s face, mainly his mother’s, gives no hints; he has her fleur-de-lis nose and square jaw. No pictures of June’s husband exist. After he left, she cut his face from photos with sewing scissors. If you flip through their oldest family album,
you’ll discover their wedding print with his face missing, an elegantly absent polygon; a man’s body reared back either in laughter or in pre-sneeze, the headless horseman at play; five men, muddy and smiling, their arms around one another’s shoulders, my father and a faceless man among them. So when I imagine June’s husband driving west (it’s always through the desert, as though that’s the only place to escape), I imagine his bulky shoulders with my father’s narrow head, or with Adam’s, or—sometimes—with mine.

And because Adam was fatherless, he needed a placeholder. When we were five, June Ellison created for Adam the myth of his birth, an epic, stupid denial he’s never outgrown and she’s never corrected. (If this ever finds you, June, I’m sorry: it’s the only thing I begrudge you.) Though we lived next door to them, our house seemed brighter and cheerier, better maintained and more of a home, so they spent most Sunday afternoons with us after church. The day of her lie, the sermon had been about respecting fathers and Our Father. In Sunday School, Missus Beth asked all of us about our fathers—almost all of us. When she spoke to our side of the semi-circle, she added phrases like, “And your mothers, too,” in her slow, condescending way.

That afternoon, Adam interrupted our parents’ post-lunch conversation by standing in front of June and saying, “Mom, everybody has a father. Tommy has a father. Brother Steve”—our pastor—“has a father. Why don’t I have a father?”

June set him on her lap and bounced him on her knee. “Of course you have a father,” she said. “Everybody has a father. God’s your father.”

He said, “Oh, okay,” and scaled down her chair to help reconfigure my blue plastic train tracks to a curve-riddled mess that could only end in a wreck. A couple of minutes after her first answer, he intruded the adults’ world again and asked June, “So am I like Jesus?”

“Yes, sweetie.”
He beamed. “My father is the holy spirit?”

Then the myth: “Yes, he is.” She joined us kids on the floor as she kept up her conversation with my parents, whatever it was.

I would love to go back and see my father then. When skepticism brims to his face, it’s priceless, probably his only truly great quality—so long as it’s not directed at you. My parents later urged June to correct herself, to tell Adam the truth, or something close enough to the truth so he wouldn’t think he was the Second Coming. A stork would have been more appropriate. However, June hammered home that he should tell no one. When he asked why not, she said, “Because they would be jealous.”

No one knows how many followers he has. A group of roughly a dozen (sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less) keep close to him and deliver messages for him. He appears in public with little warning and draws intense, large crowds. He has no fixed address, no credit cards. But various websites spread some version of his message—whatever it is; the message changes with the devotee, it seems.

I’d like to make one thing clear: other than the miracle of his birth, Adam has never claimed to be a messiah. Others have claimed that for him. He is a man; at times, little else seems verifiable.

In a way, telling Adam he was the son of God wasn’t all that strange. The extended Ellison family had, and probably has still, some religious nuts in it, schismatics tossed like acorns from the family tree. On his father’s side—June’s husband’s side, rather—most of the relatives attended Assembly of God churches and looked down on backsliders for missing a
single Sunday, even (or especially) if you were sick. Repentacostals, I like to call them. After Adam was born, they sent June greeting cards on religious holidays and birthdays, but the tone remained distant. We hope you are well, give Adam our best wishes, we will never forgive Daniel for leaving you nor will we forgive your infidelity. Pleasant stuff. These cards were never addressed to Adam, as if he were some apostate or inferior being. I wanted to mock these cards, stacked among others in a drawer of her living-room dresser, but the spelling and grammar were impeccable, the syntax old-fashioned and as artful as most anachronisms, the messages terse and unrevealing.

On June’s side of the family, the religion was more mixed. The Markham family included scattered ardent atheists—a brother and sister-in-law, some cousins—as well as spiritual travelers who lapsed into some illegality, then righted themselves in the eyes of the law and the church. They got washed in the blood of the lamb, rinsed, and repeated.

My favorite of June’s relatives, the only one I really had a chance to develop a personal opinion about at all, was her sister Sharon, a divorcée who moved from state to state and church to church in search of the perfect community. She visited June and Adam a couple times a year, and she was the most cheerful woman in my childhood. Even my father, who usually kept fanatics at arm’s length, loved her visits. Other than saying grace, she kept her religion to herself, and she was earthy and witty. She had a little extra weight, buoyant flab; she never stopped smiling. She listened as if whatever anyone said was fascinating, whether my father explained quantum mechanics or Adam and I regaled her with tales of our magic tricks.

She was also a little dim. Not because she was religious; she simply couldn’t deal with some of the basic secular offices of life. She bought loads of trinkets for herself and others, kitsch crap that shone in her eyes. Her relatives could remember where she’d been by refrigerator
magnets and snow globes encasing monuments. What she bought for herself she ended up donating before she moved to the next state. She mislaid bills and advanced cash to anyone, even those who had never repaid prior loans. She earnestly believed in the good of people, and thus was she taken in two pyramid schemes. “Money isn’t everything,” June once said to her, too willing to forgive her sister’s error, and Sharon replied, her smile as close to bitterness as I ever saw it, “Money isn’t anything.”

June’s parents were devout, disheartened Lutherans. One son an atheist, one divorced daughter who hopped from church to church like a whore from bed to bed, another daughter estranged from her husband and raising in a tepid Methodist faith the child of an unknown father. They visited once a year and stayed in a hotel, though it was beyond their means. They were only coldly affectionate and always offered criticism. They were the sort of people you imagined slept on their backs with their arms by their sides, June’s father’s shirt tucked in, June’s mother’s dress draped neatly to each side of her, as if they were display corpses.

Adam didn’t mention his blessed birth again until we were seven. My mother let us venture past our backyard’s chain-link fence into the park and the woods beyond, “so long as I can keep an eye on you.” She read on the back patio, by then mystery novels and travel narratives. (I should mention for posterity’s sake: my mother was an elementary-school teacher before I was born. Her plan all along had been to return to work once I began school. She thrived, I learned, on having a schedule. But after years of watching me and taking care of Adam while June was at work, she decided to become a stay-at-home mom. She’d once been an ardent feminist; a bookcase in our den attested to that. The Second Sex, a hardcover first edition of The
Feminine Mystique. But I think she desired the solitude of an empty house, the solitude that eventually killed her.)

After our first few trips to the far side of the monkey bars, tornado slide, and swings, my mother didn’t actively watch us. At the edge of the woods, I’d glance to see her absorbed in her book, her hand blindly searching for her tea. I remember once looking back and, unable to see her, feeling the elation of fear like someone about to fire a gun for the first time.

We called the woods “Vietnam” though, by then, the war was over and memorialized in sun-faded antiwar bumper stickers on my father’s station wagon and “Peace” stickers on the fridge. The US was engaged in secret wars (secret to us, anyway), which needed no propaganda—there were no bodies on our screens. My mother chided us not to call the woods Vietnam, so we only did out of earshot. In our game, we hunted for and ran from Charlie. We slid leaves under the bands of our baseball caps and spread camouflage dirt on our cheeks; I still recall that potent smell of earth, the thrill of getting dirty and knowing we risked trouble. We pointed at trees with low branches outstretched like arms, readied invisible rifles or coat-hanger bayonets, and fired. As we ran to hide from the enemy, one fell wounded and begged the other to go on or save us.

One day, under the tracer fire of mosquitoes, we separated. “Private Ellison,” I said, “Go twenty clicks east,” though I had no idea what a click meant, having heard it only on television, and I couldn’t find him. I called out his name, only to hear a fractured echo. I shouted again, and my voice cracked. My mother’s responsibility for us had transmitted itself to me. I was the attentive one; he was aloof. If he were gone, I’d be blamed. If he were gone, I’d be friendless.
I found him hatless in a field of rusted culverts and spiked weeds. He was gazing
skyward like a movie character about to be pulled into a UFO. “Adam,” I said, “why’d you
quit?”

He smiled. That’s the most crisp part of the memory, that beatific smile. People always
marveled at it. Those he bestowed his beam on loved him. He seemed to get it from June; she,
too, had a nice one once.

“I got called away,” he said. I asked by whom, and he said, “My father.” To my
puzzlement, he clarified, “God called me away.”

“We’re all the children of God,” I replied, echoing what we’d heard in church.

“Yeah, I know. But I’m God’s second son.” He grabbed my sleeve and pulled me to him.
“Look up,” he said. He pointed at a cloud. The sun loomed in my peripheral vision. “Do you see
Him?” he asked.

“Sort of.” I straightened my shirt where he’d rumpled it in his fist. “What am I supposed
to see?”

Adam gaped at the sky, then glanced at me. “He’s gone. Maybe some other time.” Then
he bolted into the woods and yelled, “Let’s go get Charlie!”

His cap lay a few feet away, upside down against a pair of bald dandelions. I kicked it
into the air, as high as my face, where it hung in the air for a moment, then floated down on the
wind. He was suddenly special, and it was so easy for him.

I followed him. When he was back in my line of sight, he had his back pressed against an
oak. He put a finger to his lips and, with his other hand, looked as if he were patting a dog’s
head, our signal to get down. Instead, I hollered, “What?” and kept striding toward him. He
signaled more forcefully, eyes flaring wide, so I lay on my stomach and bore my eyes into my forearm. I was a stubborn kid, so I probably lay pouting for a minute before crawling over.

I stood and handed him his hat. “You left this out there.”

“Shh. There are unknowns out there, sir. They may be Charlies.” He punched his hand into the cap, and dirt haloed off. He slid it on and said, “Good work, Private. Do you see the unknowns?”

I skimmed the woods. Sometimes we used “unknowns” to refer to older kids, the ones we were afraid of or figured we should be afraid of. We knew all the kids in the neighborhood by sight or reputation. But I could see none. “No. Why don’t we go inside?”

“Look,” he said, “really look.”

There was nobody. “The area’s clean,” I said.

He peered around the tree, then glared at me. “You don’t see? Don’t you have eyes?” Then he did something he’s never done, before or since: he slapped his hands onto my eyes.

His palms were damp and dirty, and reeked of earth. When he took them off, he said, “Do you see anything?”

I saw trees as men, walking. The only thing I have to compare what I saw to is when heat rises off the pavement and refracts the distance, but this was more intense. Four of the trees were tall, thin people in gray fatigues, marching hunched to some doom. The moment seemed seized in time. Or maybe that’s memory’s elision, the compounding of all the times I’ve tried to remember exactly what happened. Either way, it was the first time any power manifested itself to me. We never spoke about the moment—I wanted to ask, but I was afraid.

A bird launched from an arm of one of the fatigued figures. I rubbed my eyes, and the spell was broken. I couldn’t ask how he’d done it—my mother called us. He smiled—that
smile—then bolted for my backyard. I was strangely unworried about the trouble I was in with my mother for disappearing and coming back covered in dirt and leaves.

Before I got into bed that night, I prayed as usual. For some time, I had included June and Adam among those I wished blessings upon. That night, I withheld his name until the end of my prayer to give him God’s extra attention. I was both consecrated and confused by what Adam had done that afternoon. I believed in his vision, but I didn’t know what it meant. That night I initiated one of my long-time night fantasies, recreating the trees as men and knowing what it means. Even now, writing about it, I close my eyes and half-see it. The scene plays variously. One of them laughs (the wind in the trees); one of them stops to light a cigarette. I even give them faces. My father’s face, Adam’s. And thus the image is corrupted.

We—my family and Adam’s—attended First Methodist, a squat building on what was then a two-lane road. If it didn’t have a sign, you would guess it were someone’s house or badly planned office space. The church had pale stained-glass windows taken from condemned places of worship, a random assortment of saints and scenes like playing cards taken from multiple decks. The carpet down the aisle sported black gum stains, and the cushions across the pews were thin as the hair of the elderly. But we attended weekly, as did many. The congregation overwhelmed me when I was very young, so when Brother Steve called the kids to the altar, told a jokey story, and sent us on our way to Sunday School, I felt happy and special.

The main reason I liked Sunday School—I was a star student. I remembered the stories, I asked the right questions, I memorized meanings from the sermons. Adam asked questions that were off the subject and troubling, questions that have pestered believers as long as there’s been faith. “Where is God?” “How big is God?” “How do we know what to trust?”
Missus Beth, who wore pilled sweaters with blocky animal patterns and wrote on the chalkboard in soothing, loopy letters, led our class. She answered questions by framing the air in front of her, and she tried to avoid Adam’s raised hand. Though the rest of us were wary of his questions, we deferred to him or, when we saw his hand go up matter-of-factly, not quickly like the hand of a teacher’s pet, our silence guided Beth to him. If I knew an answer, my hand rose, unless I saw Adam’s patient arm. I could answer the easy, dull questions—“Jonah doesn’t do what God says, so God punishes him”—but Adam asked the ones that skulked around in our minds. But Beth could scold, and no matter how much of that Adam could take, the rest of us didn’t want to.

Once, when we’d been instructed that Jesus would return, Adam asked how we would know if it was really Jesus or if it was an imposter. (We’d seen enough episodes of *Scooby-Doo* to know that ghosts are always frauds.) Beth told us that if we were true in our hearts, we would know. “You’ll hear the call,” she said. “You have to listen closely.”

“But how do we know if we’re true in our hearts? What if it’s like Jacob pretending to be Esau? How will we know the difference?”

I was amazed he remembered that story because he always jumbled the details—Isaac went to sacrifice Abraham, or Herod marked the doors of childless families. I raised my hand, not to answer, but to ask some other question.

But Beth ignored my hand. “Have faith,” she said, “and you’ll know. Remember that Jesus says, ‘According to your faith, it will be done to you.’”

“Matthew 9:29,” I said. We got bonus points—stars next to our name on a poster board in the hall—for knowing scripture citations; I savored these.

“Very good, Tommy. Does that answer your question, Adam?”
“Yes,” he said and nodded, head bowed. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew his question hadn’t been answered.

That night, I slept over at his house. As much as I liked Adam and June, I wasn’t crazy about it. The whole place, especially the sleeping bag they let me use, had this vague odor of piss and cedar, like a long-gone hamster cage. Cellophane bags and circulars piled inside the front door; pans tottered in the sink’s murky water.

For dinner, June served stove-warmed cans of ravioli, and afterward Adam and I read comic books in his room. He loved the X-Men. He once asked Beth if Jesus was an X-Man, an idea I loved but she didn’t. I tried to come up with Christ’s superhero name—X-Mass was the obvious one, along with Savior and Rebirth. Ultimately I invented SpiritFlesh. I envisioned Christ clad in yellow and blue spandex, dissolving into smoke, only to re-form elsewhere. He’d die over and over, only to rise each time to Magneto’s wry frustration. Whatever my Christ as SpiritFlesh imagined came true, and his thoughts were limited to good. Adam didn’t like the name I’d come up with, though; he seemed to think I took it too far.

But I’m getting confused. I’m mixing memories, or failing to keep them from breeding. I need to write about that one night I spent at his house after Beth hadn’t answered his question, but I have to fill in scenery from other memories. It’s just—think of all the synapses messenging forth to spread the word about the sensation of heat, the memory of an injury, the subconscious response to a tone of voice that leads to overreaction, the formation of a sentence and its interruption by a misremembered or misspoken word. Or at least try to think of all those synapses. Now: Stop them, hold them in place like Joshua held the sun still for Gibeon over battle. File them, or decorate your memory palaces with them. Cram your disgraces in a storeroom that cleans itself out, and keep in plain sight the things that open conversational space.
Is your mind a home for all that? Can you hold it still? Why should I remember the bathroom drawer full of my mother’s scarred emery boards but not the shape of her fingernails? Faced with the scatter of memories like unnamable stars spread across the sky, forget it and say: Anyway.

Anyway. Adam and I lay in the dark, him in his bed, me in the sleeping bag on the chilly floor. We made fart noises, giggled quietly so June wouldn’t hear us (she was still Mrs. Ellison to me then; I wish she could be still), wondered what the X-Men and the Green Lantern did when they weren’t fighting or hiding their identities. Did they go to the bathroom? Did they shower? Did Storm ever pick a fleck of dirt from under a thumbnail while Cyclops thumbed at an elusive, itchy gob of wax in his ear? Eventually, our silences lapsed into minutes. I wondered if Adam was asleep.

At some point, Adam whispered, “Hey, Tommy. You awake?”

“Yes.”

“Are you true in your heart?”

“Yes,” I said, too fast. I’d been wondering that earlier in the day; I didn’t realize how grateful I was that I’d forgotten. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“Yes.” He sounded so confident.

I waited to ask what I didn’t want to but had to. The thunk of the television knob turned off, June’s heavy step plodded down the hall, her hands tapped the wall as she kept her balance. After her door clicked shut, I asked Adam, “Hey. How do you know?”

He was quiet, and his loud breathing made me think he was asleep. “I just do,” he said.

“But how?” I said quietly. I wasn’t sure if he could hear. Either way, I waited for nothing.
Maybe it was his sleeping on the bed while I was on the floor; maybe it was his certainty. Maybe I’m casting into the dark water of the past for clues. But that moment seems a turning point, where he kept his faith separate from mine, and his belief gave birth to my doubt.
So far as I know, since Daniel Ellison disappeared, June Ellison has gone to bed alone every night. The evening her husband left, she slept on the living-room sofa bed, hoping or assuming he would come home within hours. He’d thrown together a suitcase and duffel of necessities but abandoned plenty of his things around the house—not least his wife and her pregnant belly. She slept on the fold-out for two weeks, until an envelope of cash arrived with instructions to ship some personal items—a Bible and a Daily Prayer book, a good-employee plaque he’d earned, an engraved serving spoon his father had made for his mother—to a P. O. Box in Arizona. She sent everything he requested, I later learned, except his family Bible, because in the Notes section she had written the details of their family trees all the way back to 1820. On the flyleaf, Daniel Ellison’s great-grandfather had inscribed it to Daniel’s grandfather; Daniel’s grandfather had inscribed it to Daniel’s father; Daniel’s father had inscribed it to Daniel; and June inscribed it to Adam.

Daniel Ellison left plenty of oddities, and June kept them around. As I’ve written, I only know him through his debris. D. A. E.—his initials carved into woodwork. I edged my fingertips into those grooves on a dull, hot summer day. June was at work; Adam read comics in his room. I’d gone to the bathroom and, on the way back into the hall, saw a sliver of daylight between her door and the doorframe. Barely open—an invitation. I’d never been in there. Aware of my weight on the floorboards beneath the carpet, I stepped into her room and eased the door shut behind me. Unlike the rest of their house, the bedroom was immaculate: the bedspread tight and neat on the made bed, pairs of shoes lined beneath the window looking out, surfaces shining. I went straight to the dresser, which in my parents’ bedroom always offered the most interesting
mysteries. Mostly harmless, of course, but for a child a treasure chest. In my mother’s sock drawer, I’d found a postcard of the Grand Canyon, written from my father to her: all it read was, “You are in my mind.” My mother’s jewelry box, neatly organized with earrings she rarely wore, also stored notes she wrote to herself, phrases so inscrutable I can’t recall a single one.

I proceeded first to June’s jewelry box, next to a row of near-empty perfume bottles. I knew instantly it had been made for her, not store-bought. The box had a dark lacquer. The thin brushstrokes, sloppily done, seemed a scarring, and a hair from the brush had been painted into the lacquer. The woodwork was perfect, though, as neat as the setting for a diamond. I eased open the lid. A green almost-square of felt fell from the top. Strings of necklaces and hooks of earrings lay tangled. Inside the hinged lid, engraved neatly and deeply—a true craftsman’s work—was

    From D. A. E.
    to J. M. E.

I thumbed the initials, then bent and inhaled the lacquer and pine.

    Adam’s voice: “What are you doing?”

    I knocked the box to the floor; the jewelry clinked into the shag carpet and onto my socked feet.

    Before I could explain—and what could I possibly explain?—he said, “Get out of my mom and dad’s room.”

    Those last words—dad’s room—made me pause. I knelt and said, “Let me clean this up,” scooping the jewelry like a spill of cereal. Shreds of carpet came with the hooks, but I got it all in haphazardly, closed the lid, and set the box on the dresser.
Even as I walked past him, Adam stood in the same spot but gazed at the window toward the woods.

In his room, I realized the dresser, almost as tall as me, was homemade, too, and I wondered where D. A. E.’s initials might be. When Adam came in, he said, “Why are you still here?”

“You said—”

“Shut up.”

“You said your mom and dad’s room. What did you mean by that?”

Silly as it may sound, I had as much at stake in his paternity as he did. I’d heard his “son of God” claim enough for it to stick, and though I doubted, I envied him. He believed in it more fully than I did in anything. And I wanted to preserve the idea of Adam’s faith in God as his father because of my father, who mocked June (not to her face) for telling Adam his father was the holy spirit. He said to my mother, “To tell your little boy that? Come on. It’s dangerous, maybe even criminal.”

My mother agreed, but tentatively. She stood up for June’s eccentricities in ways she wouldn’t for others, and I leaned toward her, mainly because she was always there and he wasn’t: My father wasn’t what you’d call a bad father, not abusive or absent, but he was so remote I had no idea what he thought of me. If he spoke politely to June but scorned her behind her back, what did he say when I was out of the room? If he mocked my mother to me, gently or not, then what was I to him? I wanted in his place Adam’s unjudgmental God who smiled upon him in the woods, who helped him be true in his heart. Unlike the weirdly sullen kids we knew who had only a mother at home, Adam seemed so happy to have as his father that potent absence.
At that moment, Adam red and quivering in his doorway, I realized that June’s missing husband was as real and physical as anyone I’d ever met. Since he’d always been gone and replaced by a shadowy, abstract thing, he’d been null. With the touch of those engraved letters still in my fingertip, I needed to flesh him out. I asked again: “Why did you say your mom and dad’s room?”

“He really owns the place, not mom,” he said. “She showed me his name on the deed. All his stuff’s around, too.”

I wasn’t satisfied. “But why’d you call him your dad?”

“He’s not my dad, but it’s easier to say my mom and dad than my mom and her husband.” He glared at me as he spoke. He squeezed his thumbs inside his fists. “Besides, my real father is here, too. I can sense him. God is here.” I must have had my father’s look of skepticism, because he said, “Do you want to deny it?”

“No,” I said, seeing the fury in his face. “I don’t want to deny it.”

His breath steadied with each exhalation. Then he sat back down to his comics as if I weren’t there. Suddenly as placid as any other day.

So I risked a question. “Adam, what was he like? Your—your mom’s husband?”

“He was a coward,” he said, offhand.

I was hesitant. I’ve always been larger than Adam—thicker, a couple of inches taller—but underneath his calm he seemed to have a strength readying to expose itself. He rolled one shoulder back, tightening his t-shirt across his thin chest. I asked, “What else? What was he like?”

His shoulders reverted to their slump. “I don’t know.”

“Do you hate him?”
He wasn’t shocked by the question. “Yes.”

In those days, my father did a lot of research. He’d earned tenure, and instead of easing up, he used it to disappear into his work, little of which he ever published or presented. When I did see him, he was exhausted and prone to cynicism not yet in my lexicon. I knew kids whose fathers beat them, kids who turned the insults they heard at home into weaponry on the playground—compared to those fathers, mine was nothing. Not cruel, not kind.

He was always a skinny man. Even when he began to put on weight, most of his body stayed skinny while his belly convexed into a gut. He slouched and slumped, and in the photo of him I keep near my bed (facedown—only sometimes can I look at it), he’s hunched over his desk, pencil in his left hand poised to work, the merest space between lead and paper, his other hand a fist boring into his forehead, a posture of frustration. I took the photo when he wasn’t looking. Right after the flash went off, he said, “Goddamn it, Tommy.” I was only emulating his shutterbugging.

Two memories. One evening, my mother’s making dinner. My father’s sketching on graph paper. When I ask what he’s doing, he tells me “Nothing,” says to find something to do until dinner. I turn on the TV; he tells me to shut it off before the screen’s image warms up. Behind my hand, I flip him off. My mother, who has already told us dinner will be in ten minutes, comes out and says, “Sorry, it’ll be another ten minutes.” My father says without looking at her, “That’s okay,” then rolls his eyes for my attention. When she’s back in the kitchen, my father mutters, “I hope she’s not screwing it up.” He grins meanly. I am supposed to laugh, and I do not. Instead I head into the kitchen, which I usually avoid during dinner prep, and my mother assigns me tasks—setting the table, salting the mashed potatoes. Throughout dinner,
my father glances at me as if to divine what, if anything, I’ve told her. Whether or not I’m a traitor.

That memory is about as mundane as they come, but it echoes. At times like my father seemed simply an algorithm of petty malice, and that, more than anything else, that’s what I’ve inherited from him.

Memory two. A Saturday. My mother is working in the garden, my father is napping on the living-room couch. He’s on his side, his mouth open. I sneak into my parents’ room. They can reach into my drawers and my closet without repercussion, but I can only return the favor in secret. I open the drawers of their dresser, built by my mother’s father, whom I never met, and inhale walnut and my father’s handkerchiefs. My mother’s drawer of flesh-colored bras confounds me, and I test myself by lifting and refolding them. Before I leave, cognizant of the danger of being caught, I spray myself with my mother’s perfume, a smell I love. She wears it rarely: nights out with my father, visits from in-laws.

When I walk back into the living room, my footsteps wake my father. He keeps his eyes closed, but he arches his back, licks his lips, and takes a long, loud breath. He smiles. “Lilacs,” he says. “Come here.”

I freeze, caught. I stand less than five feet from my father. Eyes still closed, he holds out his left arm, the one on top, and says again, “Come here.” After a few quiet seconds, he opens his eyes. His face is confusion, anger.

“What on earth are you doing?” he says.

I run to the bathroom and slam the door. I disrobe and take a bath. Neither of us ever mentions this. From time to time throughout my life, I think of it and feel fully strange.
Whatever else may be true of Adam, he was my greatest friend, and I his. We had everyone’s private language, Pig Latin. We made a game of reciting the Lord’s Prayer, timing ourselves to see who finished first. (We couldn’t declare a winner, thanks to an argument about how to pronounce the very first word, Our.) When we played Vietnam at home, we stood with our backs against adjacent trees, holding invisible rifles to our chests while rock grenades bulged from our pockets, and we shouted, “Oh-thray ow-nay,” or “ease-say ire-fay!” Our school’s playground had a large fort built and donated by a local construction company, a raised deck of two-by-fours with an open center that ladders led down to. While other third graders chased each other around the deck, the dirt and sand from their shoes mizzling down between the boards, Adam and I communicated in Pig Latin, sharing secrets I’ve long since forgotten. Maybe they weren’t even secrets, or maybe something Adam told me then, brought now to light, would make everything I want to know clear.

Fluent as we became, we didn’t use it for long. One night he and June were over at our house for dinner—an unusual formal affair dressed in candlesticks and cloth napkins. I don’t remember the occasion. I helped my mom put the leaf in the dining room table, a task at which I was expert. As we sat at dinner, Adam leaned over to me and said quietly in Pig Latin, “I like your mom’s cooking.”

“Ee-may, oo-tay,” I replied.

What he noticed, and I didn’t, is that my mother smiled. But instead of stopping the conversation or letting me know, he spoke again in Pig Latin. “I ike-lay or-yay ad-day, oo-tay.”

Strangely betrayed, I glared at Adam and said what seemed the powerful thing to say: “I ate-hay eye-may ather-fay.”
The noise of altered breathing, dropped silverware. “Thomas James Miller,” my father said, the full form of my name the signal I’d erred, “ilence-say.”

I didn’t cry much as a child, but then the tears were out, my face hot, before I could realize. I shoved my chair backward. Later, my mother would use a wet washcloth to remove the two brown paint notches the chair left on the wall.

I went straight to bed and plunged my face into the pillow. I sobbed and heaved heavy, awkward breaths, pressed my other pillow against my ears. I wanted to delete my head, everything that happened in it, everything I’d ever taken in through my senses. I heard the door open behind me and waited my eyelids to turn orange when the light came on. Instead, the door was nestled shut, and the room stayed dark. Anyone could have come in.

My body twitched at the first touch on my back—my mother’s delicate hands, so I let them stay. The mattress canted under her weight, and I adjusted my hips. She whispered in my ear, “Tommy, why do you hate your father?”

“I don’t hate him,” I yelled, muffled by the pillow. But that was, if not a lie, then inexact. The appeal of hatred drew me near as I tried to hold onto the proscriptions against it. (It’s been over twenty years, so I can use a complicated way of saying I was torn.)

“Shh.” My mother stroked my back. I miss this; I can admit now I sometimes pretended being upset so I could experience that warmth. I wonder how common that is—if, for example, Adam ever lied the same way.

“It’s okay. I won’t tell him why you hate him.”

I lifted my face from the pillow. “But I don’t,” I said, quieter this time, whispering because it was dark. “It’s wrong to hate.” I was thinking of Adam, how justified he was in saying he hated June’s husband.
“Listen, sweetie. I want to tell you a secret. Can you keep a secret?”

I looked up at her, a blur in the dark, and nodded.

“Here it is: it’s normal to hate. Everybody does sometimes. But you do your best not to show it.”

“But Mom, I don’t hate Dad.”

She rubbed my shoulders and arms, then pulled me up into an uncomfortable hug with her. “It’s okay, sweetie,” she said. “You want to know something else?”

I nodded.

“Sometimes I hate him, too.”

She took me to the bathroom, ran cold water over a washcloth, then wiped my cheeks and forehead with it. She smiled. “You’re my blessing,” she said and squeezed a few drops of water into my hair, then tousled it with her hand. I tried to smile but couldn’t, fat with the mystery that she hated my father.

When we went to the dining room, June and Adam were gone, their plates in place, scattered with unfinished food I would scrape into the trash. My father mopped his plate with his last chunk of bread. As I thought I had to, I hugged him as he chewed and said I was sorry. He patted my shoulder and told me it was okay. I wanted to tell him, no, it wasn’t.

The next day, my parents ran errands together and sent me over to Adam and June’s. I wanted to tell him what I knew, but I didn’t know how. I couldn’t say a thing about the night before, so Adam and I watched cartoons as if the world had not unveiled another inscrutable truth.
Chapter and Verse—The First Gospel

One—

This is the Gospel of the new, of the end, of Adam Emmanuel Ellison. Knowing, as I do, the life of Adam, it seemed necessary to write an account of his teachings so everyone can understand truly what they have heard.

Many have claimed the signs of the Second Coming, as we have waited much of our history and all our individual lives for the vagrant savior. We have waited for messenger and moment, and as the peak of our collective hope disappears on the horizon line of history, we need wait no longer. Adam Ellison, the Son of God, has come.

His lineage matters nothing, for he is the child of God. We cannot link the chain of begats, the progeny of human sinner and sin, from Abraham to David to Jesus to Adam, and we need not. For the story is thus: the Lord sent a messenger to his servant June Marie Ellison, wife of Daniel Adam Ellison, and told her she would mother the son of God. She accepted her charge.

Unlike Joseph, the parent of Christ, the husband of the mother failed in his faith and left her to raise the Son of God alone. Knowing precociously her burden, the child Adam gave his own annunciation upon appearance outside the holy womb, his first breath the word of God known as such but unintelligible to humankind.

To ease the troubled son, the mother told him of his lineage, the patrimony of God and the absence of her unjust husband. And thus he knew.

Two—
As a child, Adam’s power manifested beyond his understanding. Once, he stumbled lost into a small wilderness. In an opening of trees, God shone His light upon his son and communicated his love and mission. Because he was the son of God, Adam could see and hear God directly but could not pass on the message to others. Thus anointed, Adam carried secret an echo of God’s capacity. When he encountered a neighbor boy, his closest friend and first apostle, Adam endowed him with brief access to his vision. Just as Christ enabled the blind man’s eyes to see, Adam made his eyes to see the wind-swung trees as people, as the earth-bound walking creation of God.

The apostle asked, “How did you cause this vision?” Adam said, “One cannot need to know the ways of God.”
January 10: You Will Surely Die, You Will Not Surely Die

One night when I was eight, my parents and I were all in the living room together after dinner. I lay on the carpet doing homework. My mother had her family’s black-and-white photos laid out on the coffee table. My father stood as he often did, hunched as if examining a coin on the floor.

A wail invaded the neighborhood, then silenced. My father, who seems so passive in the rest of my memories, ran outside. My mother and I stepped onto the porch. My father’s form appeared at one side of the house, crossed in front of us, then disappeared by the other side. Keening began—from June and Adam’s. My father disappeared into their place; my mother followed, signaling for me to stay put, but I tagged along. At the Ellisons’ open front door, we looked at one another, and in that moment she ascribed to me some maturity and led me in.

My father hugged June tightly. His grip seemed to constrict her moan; her arm extended over his shoulder as if she were trying to reach the television. I’d never seen him hug my mother that tightly. His bicep looked fuller than it ever had. I was barefoot, my toes on the living-room carpet, my heels on the dining-room linoleum. Adam stood near my father and June, glancing between them and the television. On the news, a local anchor narrated helicopter footage of the mass suicides at the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana. The screen showed sheets over uneven mounds that I would learn the next day were bloated bodies.

As the report ended, June’s voice articulated a name. “Sharon,” she said, over and again.

My mother’s squeezing hand hurt. Adam stepped to the television, his mother still crying out Sharon’s name, and turned it off and on. He did this several times back and forth, finally
leaving it off, then went to his mother and grasped her arm. “Mom,” he said, “it’s okay. Aunt Sharon’s okay.”

Mother hurried to him and said, “Adam, hush.”

He said again, “She’s okay. Mom, she’s happy.”

My mother grabbed his shoulder and yelled, “Adam, no.”

“Claire,” June said, her voice unshaken as if she hadn’t been crying at all. My mother and father both stepped back from June and Adam. The outline of her cheekbones firm, June said, “It’s okay. Thanks for coming over.”

She seemed stern but healed. We went home.

I gathered my homework. My mother sat over the photos of her family and burst into sobs. My father sat next to her, palmed her shoulder, and signaled me to go to my room.

We spent much of the next several days at their house, my mother consoling June, me and Adam playing quietly with a magic kit in his room. There was word of survivors, but no names had been released yet. June had called the phone number for relatives of Peoples Temple members and been told to wait for information. Every time the phone rang, we watched June hold the receiver to her ear, then ease once she learned the call wasn’t news.

They called on Sunday to inform her. I was dressed up, but we skipped church to be with June and Adam, so I was in my sweater and little slacks while he was in his pajamas. The phone rang; I think we all knew.

“Hello? Yes, this is her.” And then the crying, sobs withheld as part of telephone decorum. She nodded as the conversation went on; my mother rubbed June’s back.
She thanked whoever was on the other end and hung up. We all crowded around her. Instead of letting herself sob, she cried quietly and trembled. “I need to call my parents,” she said, “and let them know.”

Adam hugged her, then stepped away. He had that beatific, blessed half-smile on his face.

“Mom,” he said, “I told you. Aunt Sharon’s okay. She’s happy.”

June slapped the shit out of him, her palm hitting his ear instead of his cheek and her watch cutting the skin beneath his eye. He landed on his knees, hunched, his back facing her, and she followed, pounding on his back before my parents dragged her to the sofa.

Adam got up, tears in his eyes, blood rolling down his face and ticking onto his shirt. A spatter marked the carpet. He walked to his mother.

“Adam, wait,” my father said, but Adam climbed onto the couch and hugged his mother. My parents let her go, and she hugged him back. A furious, loving hug.

They were out of town for a week; I sat lonely in class and at home. I collected Adam’s schoolwork. I thought I’d never see him again. June had never hit him, never even spanked him, and it seemed in that one slap the restraint of her life unlatched.

When they came back, Adam had a small bruise and a scab the shape of a fingernail clipping beneath his eye. My parents wouldn’t let me listen when June told them about the trip, and Adam told me little. “I met all these people I’m supposed to be related to,” was all he said.

He seemed to have matured by a year in the week he’d been gone. His face was more serious, his reactions more subdued and measured. When I asked if he wanted to play Vietnam, or go shoot hoops, he thought for a moment before answering. I didn’t know what was on his mind, and he gave me no opportunity to learn. But I could tell in the way he interacted with June
that something had changed, that his love for her had cocooned itself. His hugs seemed perfunctory. In fact, when I learned the word *perfunctory,* the way Adam hugged his mother came to mind.

I learned later that the week had been spent among dozens of extended family as well as relatives of other Jonestown victims. They formed support groups, they went from one ceremony to the next, they were interviewed by police and the FBI in large groups and individually. As June put it to me in a letter, “We didn’t get to mourn, we were so busy making a show of mourning.”

By that age, I had discovered the joy of skipping school. After I got strep throat, my mother’s fear of illness overrode my father’s skepticism about fevers that didn’t register on the thermometer. I was alone a lot on sick days as my mother ran errands. She taught music classes a few days a week at a nursing home. I spent a lot of time in their bedroom, which smelled of body odor and Pine-Sol, scents I still associate with adulthood. I rooted around, posed in my father’s dust-threaded suit jackets, flipped through the novels my mother’d had since college. I always expected her marginalia to be revelatory, but I discovered nothing but cryptic references to the novels themselves, to literary terms, and the occasional “pick up detergent” written on the flyleaf.

I also rummaged in my father’s office and especially liked going through the photography books he collected. He said images advanced his understanding of physics from the theoretical back into the real world. Though he took most of our family photos—and thus is absent from most—he had little interest in compiling or reviewing them except for a few he had enlarged and kept in Mylar sleeves in his desk. I have flipped through these every so often,
wondering what motivated him to keep certain prints—one of me looking away from the camera, a blurred sparrow hovering above a nest. Other than one framed on his desk, he had enlarged none of my mother. When I was fourteen, I showed him the stack and asked him to tell me why he preserved them. He responded, “Why were you going through my desk?”

One sick day not long after Jonestown—this would’ve been 1981—I found on my father’s bookcase a crisp new hardcover book of Vietnam photographs. The spine sighed when I opened the front cover. By then of course, and our game in the woods filled fewer of our days. But looking through the book of photographs, I immersed myself: in the horizon of rice paddies with a lone figure balanced on dry land, the view from a low helicopter as the grass parted for backpacked soldiers leaping down, the rows of body bags and stretchers in the pattern of a flag for some undemarcated country.

When I reached the section headed “Vietnam Perspectives,” an image altered me. The first photo showed a man on fire. He sits Indian style, as we called it in school, in the middle of the street, with a car, empty gas can, and crowd behind him, the fire in his lap as if his body is a hearth, his manner calm as if he awaits a cup of tea. As his body burns, he is motionless and silent. The caption explained that he was immolating himself to protest the South Vietnamese president’s anti-Buddhist policies. Though the monk, Thich Quang Duc, died, his heart survived the fire and, later, cremation, and is an object of reverence for Buddhists. It’s like the Shroud of Turin, only more verifiable.

I wept. After the incident at dinner with June and Adam, I’d trained myself to withhold tears, but the image unsealed me. I wiped the tears from the page with my shirt. I didn’t cry solely because he was dying, his life in a still photo forever ending, I cried because I could see his soul in that photo, and it was content and powerful. I, on the other hand, was bitter, unable to
sense in myself anything like a soul. Though I thought I knew God existed, I couldn’t feel God. At church, Brother Steve spoke of being on fire for the Lord; the monk turned that literal. Now I believed I had a mission, a way to discover my soul, a way to discover God: I would go into the woods and immolate myself.

I brought a box of matches from the kitchen junk drawer. It was early afternoon. My mother would be out for a while and the neighbors were at work, so I went to the clearing where I’d found Adam supposedly receiving his message from the Lord. I sat on a patch of yellow grass skinned in sunlight, thinking that if a sunbeam held me as they did God’s anointed in art, my transformation would be more likely to work. I had to strike a match several times, unsure how to grip it as I was the first time I gripped a pencil to write. When it lit, though, the flame mirrored my anxiety. To say I was afraid is to say nothing of my fear, compounded by a desire to do right, to be better than Adam (or at least worthy of him), to be proud and make others proud. Once, when I was seven, my father was speaking to a colleague on the phone and couldn’t recall the word he meant to use. I’d been listening and said, “Inertia.” He looked at me and smiled. “Inertia,” he said as if I’d taught him a mantra. “Thank you.” That’s what I wanted.

When the flame neared my fingers, I shook it out and pressed my thumb and forefinger against my tongue. Successful on the next strike, I let it nip the hem of my shirt and burn a spot black. Failure. So I lit one more, lifted my shirt and tucked it under my chin, and held the match a finger’s width from my belly. The fire wavered with the wind. I suppressed yelps when it touched me. By the time I extinguished it, I had imprinted upon myself a maroon thumb and denied my tears access to the same air that kept the flame alive.

Sweating heavily in the sun, I moved into the shade of two oaks, away from the asphalt path that split the woods. There a strange thing happened. As my skin throbbed, the peak of pain
higher than my threshold for staying silent, I focused on controlling my breath. When I was younger, my mother would tell me to breathe slowly, whispering hotly against my ear, her belly as she held me a cue. I followed that cue in the woods, my eyes closed. My senses retuned as if I were adjusting internal knobs. I lifted my arms over my head and faced my palms out in the pose of someone flagging down a car. My fingers tingled as the blood drew down to my torso. I set my arms in my lap.

Then: I seemed the mechanism that controlled the universe’s gears. I became my breath spreading in my limbs, my extremities dissolving into particles of air. Had I opened my eyes, I would have seen myself disperse. For the only time, I sensed what Adam—not my friend, but the first man of Genesis—would have sensed when he was embodied.

But I must acknowledge what I know. What I felt must have been some physiological response to the pain of my belly, or the intake of air, or low blood-sugar—I hadn’t eaten lunch. Whatever the cause of that moment that still mystifies me, my body became flesh again when my mother called my name. The panic in her voice resonated with the voice I’d heard on the news of a mother begging for the return of her abducted son. I opened my eyes; the physical world reconstituted itself. I stood on confused legs and headed home. My body was cool, my esophagus was slivered, my jeans were damp from sitting on ground that had absorbed the morning rain. When my mother saw me, terror in her face morphed to anger—I had disappeared in her mind, only to materialize truant.

Having experienced what I had, I expected her to recognize the change I’d undergone, whatever it was. Unusually, I didn’t think I would be in trouble. As soon as she reached me, I thought, she would look in my eyes and see my metamorphosis.
When we met each other, though, her face a puzzle of red blotches, her thin hair in tangles, she said, “What are you doing out here? Did you lie when you said you were sick this morning?”

Normally I’d pick at my fingernails, but I gazed into her eyes. “I was doing better.”

Her face softened, but she was weary from the day and grabbed my bicep to lead me into the house. Her hands were dry and pale—she washed them repeatedly those days, wary of germs from the nursing home.

She made me help with dinner. She hard-boiled eggs, and when they were cool, I tapped their shells against the counter and peeled them into the trash. In the tense clatter of dinner prep, the burn I’d given myself enunciated and echoed. I slipped a cool half-shell against it under my shirt and held steady my resolve. When my father came home, she told him how she’d found me missing.

“Doing better, then,” he said as he set his satchel in his chair. His taunt almost pushed me to confess my experience. But he left the room and didn’t return until time to eat.

During dinner, my mother noticed me hiding one hand under the table. I held a cool spoon against the burn on my belly. They were furious and forced the story out of me, from finding the Vietnam book to holding the match near my skin. I didn’t tell them the aftermath.

“Why in the hell would you do something like that?” my father asked as my mother spread lotion on the wound.

As my mother attended me to bed, something she hadn’t done in years, she told me not to tell anyone what I’d done. But I knew Adam would comprehend my change, my power, even if they didn’t.
The next morning, when my father woke me and asked how I was, he was kind, as if the previous evening had been forgotten. I walked past him, dragging one leg like a heavy suitcase. “I don’t know if I can make it,” I said. He laughed.

When it was time to go, I found Adam as usual leaning against the station wagon, his backpack at his feet. We buckled ourselves in, though we knew it would take my father a couple of minutes to come out. I asked if anything interesting had happened at school, but he had nothing to report. He observed the bell of dew on the car’s hood. He hadn’t noticed my transformation.

Desperate, I said, “I had a spiritual event yesterday.” We’d picked up the word “event” from the news and applied it to anything out-of-the-ordinary.

He turned to me, interested. “What happened?”

“I went out into the woods to pray.” I didn’t mention the Vietnam photographs or my failed immolation, even as my shirt triggered the blister to hurt. “When I was praying, the spirit of the Lord took me. I sort of became a spirit.”

I stopped—my father got in the car.

“What next?” Adam asked.

They exchanged good mornings. The quiet stood stale as my father started the car. He pulled into the street, steadying his briefcase in the passenger seat as we turned. “So Tommy,” he said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror, “what next?”

“What what next?”

My father slowed the car to a stop against the curb. He pointed at me in the rearview, all amity gone. “We told you last night, don’t tell anyone about yesterday.” He glanced at Adam, then accelerated. “You can tell your best friend if you need to, but nobody else.”
At the next stop sign, Adam said, “Are you okay?”

I nodded but couldn’t speak.

Adam pestered me all morning to know what had happened the previous day. Every time I tried to tell him, he looked skeptical. I was still shaken from my father’s anger about it, and I knew I’d get only doubt from Adam. So as we walked back to class from lunch, I told him I’d made it up.
January 11: The Acts of Acolytes

I envied the acolytes at our church. I imagined striding in their place—striding rather than merely walking—with the tooth-white surplices hanging behind, followed by Brother Steve. These boys guided the ceremony by leading the processional and lighting the candles, then snuffing them out before leading the recessional out. And the chairs the acolytes sat in were plush, with a metal frame and burnt-orange padding on the seat and back. They sat to the side beneath a stained-glass window of Matthew looking upward to receive the word of God. A strip of duct tape sealed a rip on one seat, but no matter. Compared to the pews, those chairs looked like relief, a step up in the world. Each pew had a faded velvet cushion that was, as I recall, merely ornamental, the slightest of buffers between ass and hard wood, and the backs reminded me I had vertebrae. Not only were acolytes minor stars of the ceremony, they had access to comfort.

I was a Sunday School star—indeed, next to my name on the poster board outside the classroom were ellipses of paper stars I’d been given to affix, signifiers of my scholastic goodness—so I was chosen. Brother Steve pulled me and Adam aside after Wednesday evening youth service and told us we would be acolytes. In front of him, we smiled solemnly; on the way home, we exchanged high fives and improvised a private handshake. Still, I had no idea why he’d been picked, always the aloof charmer.

Acolytes seemed to have secret access to Brother Steve’s world. They were, in some strange way, adult. Their names also appeared in the program each week. A pack rat then as now, I hoarded the programs we received each Sunday, a stack of them in a shoebox among
imitation quartz I’d found when scrounging a lakeshore; a broken shoelace, the first I’d learned to tie; a pen my father gave me as a reward for good grades.

On our Sunday we went early, my father grumbling about the hour, my mother shushing him. She mirrored my excitement even if my father couldn’t quite. For that matter, neither could Adam, whose dwindling interest in school had spread to church. Though we’d celebrated when we’d been honored, as we headed to our duty he wore a face of benign indifference. He still cared about spirit—he occasionally reminded me of his momentous birth—but the rites appealed less to him. (One of the frustrations voiced by Adam’s contemporary detractors has been his refusal to acknowledge ceremony or take churches seriously. He tends to sermonize on the street rather than in buildings, and he has no use for crosses or Sunday best.)

Beth led us to Brother Steve’s office, where the robes and surplices hung inside a musty cabinet. We slid them on over our dress clothes, and Beth left to administer Sunday School for the early service. Brother Steve’s office was neat; manila folders rested on his desk in a stack beside a new multi-line phone—I imagined he pressed a button and reached God on the other end—and a worn, multiply-bookmarked Bible. While I tugged and nagged at the robes and surplice to get its neatest fit under my armpits and down my back, failing to hold back my nervous breakfast burps (what an awful sin, I thought, to desecrate the pastor’s office in such a vulgar human way), Adam toyed with Brother Steve’s books. Unlike my father’s, Brother Steve’s spines rested evenly on his built-in shelves as if straightened by a librarian every evening. Adam tipped one toward him, then slid it back, introducing error to the collection. He pulled out a couple, flipped through them, then crammed them back in.

“Don’t mess up Brother Steve’s books,” I said.
Ignoring me, he knelt close to the lowest shelf and blew. A fist of dust rose as if exhaled from Adam’s mouth. “You see that?” he said. “He never reads them.”

He wandered the office and desultorily studied its contents: a photo of Steve graduating from seminary, a corny thumbs-up; an embroidered Ten Commandments that looked like the “Home, Sweet Home” in my grandmother’s house; a framed, handwritten letter on the wall. Adam read aloud from it. “Dear Steven, Thank you for being such a great student. Remember your call; always ask what kind of man you are for your congregation. Be the man they need.”

The tail of his surplice had snagged high on the black robes. I went up behind and tugged the bottom.

He peered over his shoulder, then at me. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” I said.

He smirked. I couldn’t remember him ever smirking before. But it dissipated, and he slumped down in one of the two chairs facing Brother Steve’s desk. I sat next to him. Down the hall, the congregation from the first ceremony scuffled toward the exit.

“I’m nervous,” Adam said.

“Me, too.”

“During the service,” Adam whispered, “watch me. I’m going to make my soul escape my body.”

I made some noise to answer before I had one, as a shy dog jerks away when a stranger sticks out his hand, and as I stuttered to shape that noise into language, the door opened. Adam sat up straight, and Brother Steve entered, the early acolytes behind him. I didn’t know them. They were a little older, acne already sprung on their faces like overnight mushrooms. They
slipped out of the surplices and robes and handed them to Brother Steve, who put them onto hangers and set them in the cabinet.

With his smooth, hairless hands, he extended them the firm, meaty handshake I once tried to use as my model, and said, “Great job, you two. You should be really proud of yourselves.” Then he grinned. “But not too proud.”

He introduced us to them. Their palms were warm and damp like ours. After they left, Brother Steve fell into his chair; the padding exhaled. He leaned back, chest to the ceiling, and rested his forearms over his face. I’d never seen Brother Steve look anything other than strong and alert, but now he looked vulnerable. Unlike my thin and distracted father, he was a solid man who made constant eye contact and never misspoke, who smiled but never too broadly, whose posture seemed natural.

Watching his stomach rise and fall, pause, rise and fall, I was unnerved. Adam was, too, I could tell, even in his shroud of indifference. I leaned forward. “Brother Steve?”

“How’s it going, Tommy.”

Suddenly he snapped forward, spun away from us, and pulled a book from one of the shelves. He thumbed through the pages until he found what he was looking for. I tried to read his lips as he mouthed words, but I failed. He set the volume back on the shelf, evening the spine with its neighbors. “Have you been looking at my books?”

Adam said, “It was me, sir.”

I hoped for wrath, but Brother Steve smiled, faced Adam, and said, “Curiosity is a good thing. One of the unnamed virtues.” A triangular fold of chapped skin, white, rested at the center of his bottom lip. “Excuse me a second,” he said, then went into the restroom next to his shelves and closed the door.
I was flicking scum from under my pinky nail when the announcement of his urine plooshing into the toilet water began. Adam and I stifled laughs—the moment was more staggering than comic to me—then the restroom emitted Morse codes farts: short, then long.

When Brother Steve came out, Adam was giggling, I aghast. He had seemed, until that moment, a true conduit of God.

“What?” he said smiling awkwardly at Adam. “You’ve never farted?”

Of course he had, but he hadn’t had the daily observation I did of a father whose bodily ululations echoed beyond the closed bathroom door.

After the congregation filed in and found their seats, Beth brought us the candle lighters—dull brass, three feet long—and led us into the hallway to stand. As we waited for Beth’s signal, Adam leaned to me and said, “Don’t forget to watch.”

From the distance of time, my role in the service seems minuscule, but my nerves sent skittering signals, and Adam wasn’t calming them. I tasted bile and eggy breakfast in my throat. I pinched tears away and cobbled myself into a kind of composure.

“Steady,” Beth said, then pulled a plastic Bic lighter from her pocket and lit the wicks. The organ quivered through the floor into my toes. The choir and congregation began singing as Beth and Steve pulled open the double doors. Adam and I headed down the aisle, and my anxiety dispersed. Meticulously, I strode. My mother smiling as she sang; my father’s lips curled in, his look of skepticism, but he mouthed the words “Good luck.” A wave of pride dopplered from my abdomen through my body.

Our flames wavered as we walked, the odorless among the perfumed throng. At the altar, though my hands were unsteady and the fire seemed coy, the wick caught. A moment of grace, it seemed. Then we snuffed out the lights we carried. The organ continued, and as we’d practiced
in our jeans and sneakers, we paced to the chairs, leaned our candle lighters against the wall, and waited as the organ held its major C. The pipes exhaled their discordant close when the chord ended, and Brother Steve said, “You may be seated.”

I got the duct-taped chair. Adam whispered, “Keep your eyes on me.”

The look on his face was not arrogance but wonder, as if he himself were watching someone perform an impossible magic trick.

Brother Steve spoke of the beautiful weather and of getting over a sinus infection during the week. He spoke then of illness in general, fevers and chills, how susceptible we all are. “Our bodies seem to betray us,” he said, “and at the worst times.”

I sat to Adam’s left. His chair was nearer the front, so when I glanced at him I saw the elderly and long-time members in the first few rows, monuments of this church’s history, and past them a fluctuating mosaic of heads. I’d never been able to watch the audience before; I’d usually spied the strange spots on bald skin, the attentive nods, random cowlicks, the lack of interest signaled by frequent shifts, the quarter profile of a face looking elsewhere. But from the front, the audience seemed as rapt as I often was when Brother Steve spoke. They were attentive, as if not only I were watching them but God as well. I suppose I believed God was watching. It’s difficult to remember what idea I had of God at any given moment.

Several times Adam narrowed his eyes and flattened his hands on his thighs as if to enter a trance, but the service interrupted him. We rose to sing hymns, bowed our heads in prayer, echoed Brother Steve’s “Amen.” I mimed singing—my voice was dull, and its wrong notes broke like the sound of a fat finger pressing adjacent piano keys. Adam, I learned that day, also lip-synched. At least, he did that day. I don’t know whether he always had or whether he did then to focus on making his soul escape his body.
Brother Steve called the children of the congregation to the front. Usually that have included us, but as acolytes we stayed for the rest of the service, including Brother Steve’s sermon. We were now adults. Brother Steve knelt to tell the children—from my new vantage they seemed so small—that their parents got sick, just like them, because they had bodies, too. And bodies could be weak. So when their parents were sick, they needed their children to be good, to help look after them, to be a quiet presence in the house. “Most of all,” he said, “they need your loving spirit.” He smiled his beneficent, beatific smile, the one I aped in my bathroom mirror, trying to establish my own gesture of power.

With that, he rose and guided the children to rise, and they went to the back, some marching, some running before being chided to slow, and met with Beth. She led them away, and the ushers closed the doors.

As Brother Steve stepped back to the pulpit, Adam tapped my knee with his to get my attention. His face went strangely slack and inert, a mannequin’s or an idol’s face, and his breathing became steady and slow. His lips were barely parted so they seemed to be striving to close again, but unable to touch.

“Well,” Brother Steve’s voice boomed into the microphone, his flat Midwestern voice tinted with a southern accent. “I’ve got to admit, kneeling with those kids every Sunday raises my heart, but getting up sure takes a toll on my knees.”

The congregation laughed. I tried to keep my focus fully on Brother Steve, but I glanced at Adam from time to time. As far as I could tell, nothing had happened. Maybe it already had, and I’d missed it.

Brother Steve continued. “And that’s what I want to talk about today, the body. We come into this house of God every Sunday thinking pretty heavily on our souls, on our spirits and
hearts. We want God to endow us with the ability to move past all obstacles, to conquer sin, to love as fully as we can. Or if not endow us, then at least support us in that direction. But recall in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 26, after the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples to leave him, and Peter says he will not let him down. Jesus, of course, knows Peter will let him down. ‘Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ And Peter replies, ‘Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.’

“Think of that devotion, that love Peter vows to Christ. And yet it’s so easy for Peter, and for us, to fail no matter how much we devote ourselves. As Jesus predicts, Peter falls asleep on his watch.” Brother Steve exhibited his smile. “I think we all know how that feels.” The congregation laughed, and I laughed with them.

“Jesus wakes him and says, ‘So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ Think about that for a moment,” Brother Steve said, as if he would give us a moment, but he continued. “Peter, one of Christ’s earliest and most devoted disciples, could not compel his body to keep the pace of his spirit. In his moment of greatest love and duty, Peter’s body failed his spirit. He became just another night watchman asleep on the job.”

A movement in my peripheral vision called my attention. Adam’s head bobbed at an angle a few times. His eyes seemed detached like those I’d been horrified by the first time I encountered a blind man. I couldn’t tell if his stomach inflated or not. I nudged his knee with mine, but he didn’t react. “Adam,” I whispered so quietly I barely heard myself as Brother Steve continued talking.

“Think of your body in your own lives,” the sermon continued.

“Adam,” I whispered louder, “wake up. Adam.”
A woman in the front row shushed me. On our side of the chapel, people in the first several rows glared. They didn’t seem to notice Adam next to me, doing whatever he was.

Brother Steve continued his sermon. “And think of the Lord, Jesus Christ.” I forced myself to focus as best as I could on Brother Steve and not Adam. “We think of him as perfect, as he was and is, but we forget sometimes that he was, of all things, a man. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 11 when Lazarus has died, Jesus sees the sorrow of Martha and Mary at the loss of their brother. We read that Jesus ‘was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.’ The mourners lead Christ to Lazarus’ burial place, and we see how human Christ is in the single verse, John 11:35. ‘Jesus wept.’”

Adam’s torso and head catapulted into a full-bellied laugh, the kind that he had when he saw a great comic pratfall in a movie like *Airplane!* The congregation stared at him—at us—as he ebbed into giggling. I elbowed him, then scootched my chair inches away from him to signal I had nothing to do with this.

“Boys,” Brother Steve said, hunched over the pulpit, his benevolent voiced robed with belligerence and speaker static. Then he stood up. “I’ll wait.”

Boys.

Adam composed himself. The congregation whispered, and throats cleared in judgment. Adam took a deep breath, his face an image of seriousness. “I’m sorry,” he murmured and nodded to Brother Steve.

The sermon continued with eyes veering to and from us and shame spreading its hot aura around me. I couldn’t tell if Adam noticed or not. I was sweating all over, and I imagined I’d rise and leave an unholy, wet ass-print in the chair I had so prized. I spent the rest of the service thumbing the loose nub of duct tape, smearing its adhesive on my skin.
When the benediction began, Adam and I grabbed our candle lighters, strode as best we could to snuff the candles, and marched ahead of Brother Steve.

Since our admonishment, I’d been dreading our final honor, standing outside the church to shake hands with the exiting parishioners. However, once we cleared the threshold of the chapel, he leaned to us and said, “Wait in my office.”

As soon as we were there, Adam took off his robes and hung them in the cabinet. I kept mine on, though. I wanted Brother Steve to see me in them, to see me as consecrated rather than stripped to my ill-fitting and sweat-baptized Sunday best. The sleeves hung down to my hands, and with my fingers I curled them into my palms.

“You’re going to keep those on?” Adam said, again fingering Brother Steve’s books, then blowing the accumulated dust from his fingertip.

“Why did you laugh?” I said.

He snickered.

“You couldn’t do it,” I said. “Your trick didn’t work.”

He looked at me as though he couldn’t believe what I said. “Of course it worked. Didn’t you see?”

“I didn’t see anything.” I folded my arms over my chest and slumped in the chair. “All I know is you made a fool of us.”

He lifted one eyebrow in a way I’d be reminded of years later, watching villainous Orson Welles in The Third Man. “Did you hear what he said?”

I sat up straight, confident with the power of Brother Steve’s sermon. “Jesus wept.”

“That’s not how I heard it.” He sat down in Brother Steve’s chair and faced me across the desk.
“That’s Brother Steve’s chair,” I said. “You can’t sit there.”


“Why is that funny?” I was nervous for him, sitting in Brother Steve’s chair. If he came in any second, Adam would be in more trouble, and I’d be seen as complicit.

“Imagine Jesus sweeping up.”

I did, the image of a mournful, pensive Christ gazing up at the sky, brown hair grazing his shoulders, waxy tributaries of blood on his forehead, blue eyes soft and human, as he took my mother’s wood-handled straw broom and swept pine needles off the back patio. The vision was silly and weirdly plausible. “That’s not funny. Why’d you laugh like that? In church?”

“Tommy,” he said, “my soul left my body. I was up there floating over the whole congregation, I could see everything.”

“No you couldn’t.”

He was fervent and cupped his hands as if showing me an object. “You know those cartoons where Wile E. Coyote dies, and his spirit floats up to heaven, but he sees what’s going on down below and returns to the body? It was like that.”

Frustrated as I was, I admit I wanted to believe him. Part of me wants to now. But I thumbed a zit emerging on the hinge of my jaw.

He described how our parents, even my father, seemed attentive, the combed-over bald spot on Brother Steve. “And Angela Emmers,” he cooed, referring to a seventeen-year-old redhead most of us had a crush on, “I could see down her dress.”

“You’re a bad liar,” I said.

“I was up there,” he said, ignoring my resistance, enthralled, “I was aware of everything, even what people were thinking, and Brother Steve said ‘Jesus swept.’ It was so funny my soul
kind of like—it’s like I tripped and crashed into my body. I hit so hard I had to laugh. If I’d been sitting there, I probably wouldn’t even have noticed. But I couldn’t help it.”

“You’re a phony,” I said. “You’re full of crap.” I couldn’t believe I’d said “crap” in Brother Steve’s office, but I was so angry.

We heard footsteps, and Adam hurried to the seat next to me, Brother Steve’s chair revolving in his wake. Brother Steve came in with Beth right behind him. He sat at his desk and dropped his Bible with a resonant oaken thud. “Hang those up,” he said to me.

I had to step around Beth, who stood in front of the cabinet. Taking off the robes, I felt oddly exposed, as if I had to strip completely. I stood with my back to the three of them, then did as I was told and returned to the chair next to Adam.

Calmly, Brother Steve said, “I’m disappointed in you two. We all are.”

“We talked about it,” Adam said, “and we’re both really sorry.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

According to a tremulous Beth, a number of parishioners complained that I had spent the better part of the service trying to make Adam laugh, that I was the reason for his outburst.

I didn’t protest. How could I explain what Adam claimed without sounding like a liar?

“I believe in second chances,” Brother Steve said. “If I didn’t, it would make this life pretty hard. But you have to earn them. So until further notice, I’m afraid you two can’t be acolytes again.”

From the moment Brother Steve intoned “Boys” in front of the congregation, I’d expected this outcome. Adam’s reaction, though, I hadn’t foreseen. He yelped like a kicked dog.

“Brother Steve, Beth, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But you can’t take this away from me.” He looked
as though he were using every worldly and otherworldly power he had to keep the tears that welled in his eyes from rolling down his face. “My mom’s going to be so crushed.”

“I understand,” Brother Steve said. Instead of looking at Adam, he flipped the worn edges of his Bible with his thumb. Even Beth seemed unnerved, picking at the napped hem of her cardigan. “A lot of us have been let down,” Brother Steve said. “You’re going to have to earn your second chance.”

Adam stood. “No,” he said, fury in his voice. “You can’t do this.”

Brother Steve leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. He seemed less suited to this pose, though he’d clearly practiced it. “Yes, Adam, I can.”

“You farted,” Adam yelled. Brother Steve rose, but his tongue seemed like a stone in his mouth. Adam ran out, and I followed him, my head bowed.
Chapter and Verse: An Acolyte

Three—

June, loving mother to Adam, took her son to church, where he found the word of God from older texts distorted to misapprehensions. “You will know God,” the preachers said, “if you are true in your heart.” “But how can you know if you are true in your heart?” he replied. “The heart is an organ that pumps blood; the brain is an organ that interprets the world. It does not know the world. It cannot know God.”

“It is a metaphor,” the preachers said, a way of speaking of the soul.” “Well,” Adam said, “it is not a very good one.”

They punished him, and to honor God she continued to bring him. He was still then a child, however endowed with the patrimony of God. So he was silent long, and they rewarded his silence by offering him the role of an acolyte. As God’s vessel, he used the role to demonstrate the spirit’s relationship with the body. He strode upon the air, a member of the invisible, but only those of true faith could see. The preachers and the congregation, though, they looked with imperfect eyes and did not see his spirit watching over the sermon. To acknowledge their failure, Adam laughed to show the offense God took. They had ears to hear the laughter, but they did not understand it. “How can you not see in the house of my father?” he said, and they stripped him of his role and robes.

Only the apostle could see the power of the spirit and mark it down to later spread the good news of the spirit.
January 12: Methods and Madness

A note about method: I remember my day as an acolyte so clearly because that evening I wrote my first journal entry. I’d taken without permission one of my father’s coverless graphing tablets, fifty sheets of paper blue-lined into tiny squares, so I could more accurately fail to draw comic book characters to scale. But after we got home from church, Adam went with his mom, and in my room I wrote. I was furious. Four pages, my handwriting minuscule print I probably meant to be indecipherable. Though the print makes sense-making difficult, rereadings offered up not only the words themselves but additional memories of the event and others, the latter corroborated by the memories of other witnesses. (Interestingly, Biblical and other ancient texts contain their own interpretive difficulties. Not only does much ancient Hebrew omit vowels—YHWH, for example—but ancient scribes also ran letters together, like so: GODISNOWHERE.) That entry began a life of itinerant journaling, occasional notes of anger, disappointment, pride, and rare joys.

When I left for college, my mother boxed my things, including the journals, and put them in the attic. The few times I returned for visits, she asked me to separate what mattered from what didn’t so she could throw away what was worthless and make room for more. When I finally did, I found my journals neatly stacked beneath baseball cards and action figures—Captain America and Wolverine joined in a tangle of plastic death. My horrid handwriting stood open and announced all my adolescent secrets. I don’t know if my mother read them, but if she did, she kept my secrets from me and took them to her grave.

It’s necessary to mention those journals so readers will understand that I’m telling the truth. I admit that lies are necessary viruses, but I don’t want readers relying on reconstructions.
For example, a problem of Christ: if Jesus existed and was the son of God, he was still a man. He ate and shat, the sun parched his skin and lips. He was an adolescent at some point and pubesced. He had, for God’s sake, a penis. If he was a man, he got erections, because what theologian would claim an impotent savior? So, if you follow the logic fully enough, the question becomes: what gives Christ a hard-on?

Put another way: two thousand years on, we’ve lost Christ. He’s an icon, which is no miracle. He’s only a miracle if he’s truly a man. The problem with Christ as a character is that he’s not a character—there’s no W. C. Fields in him, no snark or anger or humanity. Even the Old Testament God is a gambler; cf. the Book of Job. Christ’s charisma is lost to us; in the Gospels, all he does to gain followers at first is point to them and say, “Follow me.” It happens in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, one of Christ’s most consistent characteristics. I’ve never been able to shake the sense that, in those scenes, we have to trust that Jesus is so obviously the savior that his newfound disciples simply know immediately. But that can’t be right because, throughout the Gospels, the text suggests that at times his disciples don’t realize how powerful or important he is.

I write this not for the pleasure of sacrilege—though I can’t deny the pleasure of that—but because truth is crucial to faith. Icons of Jesus expose no flaws, and Christian mythology treats him with kid gloves. But even if he was the son of God, if he was an embodiment of God, he was a body—he bled, he sweated, he failed. He had the misleading senses of man. Jesus could only be tempted in the wilderness by Satan because he was capable of knowing temptation; it’s only meaningful if there was a chance that Satan would win him over. Christ’s successful resistance in the wilderness must be measured against unwritten failures.
That’s why I love Christ in Mark 11. After leaving Bethany, he’s hungry. He sees an empty fig tree—the text tells us it’s not the season for figs—and curses it for being empty: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” It’s a raw deal for the tree, which is withered the next time the disciples encounter it. After Christ’s low–blood sugar condemnation of the tree, he returns to the temple in Jerusalem and flips over the tables of money changers and the benches of dove sellers. Imagine the kindest person you know flying into a rage, flipping over tables and fuming, his nostrils flaring, sweat matting his sideburns. Imagine some beatific Christ red-faced and fuming.

And the kicker, for each Gospel has its unacknowledged kicker: when the disciples discover that the fig tree Christ cursed has withered, the message he teaches them is forgiveness. Yes, forgive when you pray, lest you end up like the fig tree that Christ, using God’s power, did not forgive. Jesus isn’t interesting because he’s a savior; he’s interesting because he’s part man, part deity, and it’s impossible to tell where that line is drawn or if it is at all. Of course, that leads to the creation of God as man, the idea that we’re truly made in God’s image, so he has five fingers, five toes, ear hair, and all the trappings of the body. And thus we wonder what else we drew from God’s genetic pool.

Call it the anxiety of inheritance: Jesus isn’t interesting because he’s the son of God, but because he’s a son. Just like the rest of us, he’s both his father, inexorably, and himself. He’s in part his father and apart from his father. The Old Testament God lets his most faithful follower suffer, drowns the world, rains fire on cities, sends a reluctant prophet to the belly of a whale until he gets his story straight. Jesus turns over tables in anger, withers a tree that fails to produce fruit out of season. He may have his moments of compassion—as does his Old Testament father—but he’s got the fire within himself, the rage and adrenaline that fills us all.
Which leads me to this point: Adam Emmanuel Ellison is a man. He may be the messiah, he may not be. He’s the son of someone, or something. Either way, though, we cannot measure him against the ideal. We can only measure him against the real.

The common-sense consensus on suicide seems to be that those who kill themselves are weak, so we must work to uncover their weakness and its causes. We pay little attention to the cause of death, the chosen form. Method matters. The gunshot to the head, for example, suggests not only a desire to get it over with quickly but a desire to utterly obliterate the self—the brain is gone. Hanging suggests a willingness to suffer and the guilt we associate with the gallows (though the choice between belt and rope leads to varying interpretations). Slitting one’s wrists implies the need to empty one’s self out. At least, those are my pop-psychology interpretations. My father’s death, for example, illuminates this point. I never saw my father intoxicated; I can’t remember him taking a drink. But for his death, he swallowed a mix of sleeping pills and my mother’s lithium (for her cancer-induced depression) and painkillers. He wanted to go out with his senses stretching out like rubber bands. He wanted dream himself into darkness. To know the content of my father’s final dream, if I knew that I could begin to absolve my failures. Taking his life as he did, would he have known of my intractable itch to know the paths of his dying synapses? Was he that cruel?

But that is all beside the point.

In Luke 2:41–52, Jesus’ parents accidentally leave him, aged twelve, behind in Jerusalem. They’ve departed the Passover feast and, after a day, realize he’s not with them. (Ignore for a moment what this suggests about them as parents.) They find him three days later in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking questions of such depth and understanding that all
sit in awe of him. A better-than-model student. Though Adam had his own moments of
childhood wisdom, adults in his life seemed off put by his questions, not amazed. In fact, at
twelve, in junior high, I was the good student, Adam the spaced-out pubescent.

Once when I was on a flight to LaGuardia, a middle-aged woman in the next seat told me
her life story. She called junior high the greatest time of her life. From that, I knew she was a
liar. For me, every move in that period seemed a misstep. Puberty warped my body—acne,
unplanned public erections, bad haircuts. Adam rarely spoke in class—at least in the two we had
together—and burrowed through hallway crowds with me, leaving no wake. While most people
ignored him, it would be wrong to say I was unpopular. I was an immensely popular target.
Small for my age and shy, I served as the daily object of ridicule for kids with more outward
savvy, if less intelligence. They shoved, they thought quickly of insults. Adam asked
occasionally why I put up with the shit that I did, but he knew: the few times I tried to defend
myself, that led to louder teasing, crowds, the echo against the hallway of lockers of people
chanting my name.

We ate lunch with another outcast, Webster Barry, who also bused in from the county—
but a more rural area—and smelled like warm brine. He had facial hair; though we could count
the hairs of his nascent mustache, we envied it. We only saw him at school, and the life he
described fascinated us. He fired guns on his parents’ farm into rotten vegetables and old boots;
his uncle was a Vietnam vet who’d lost an arm and could cut a steak with one hand; from the
Pentecostal church near his house came unintelligible yells and women wearing hair to their
waists and jean skirts to their ankles. He told us of a world so foreign it might as well have been
Malaysia, or Canada.
Most importantly, he knew sex. The photo of his girlfriend showed she wasn’t as attractive as he claimed, but he told us how her hard nipple felt like the tip of her nose. Subsequently in class, I toyed with the cartilage of my own proboscis. Though we tested words—boobs, tits, jugs, knockers—actual breasts were as foreign to us as the words themselves. We stole looks at the bare patches of female skin, like that of Tanya Somebody, who sat in front of me in English my eighth-grade year.

One day, Webster came to school with a hickey. He tugged down the collar of his plaid flannel and showed us at lunch the elliptical bruise left by his girlfriend’s mouth. I leaned across the table, and he let go of his shirt. “Get back, fag,” he said. “I don’t want you on my neck.”

Lurching away from Webster, I slid off the backless seat and onto my ass. The cafeteria’s random jostling transformed into scattered laughter, echoing the pain that shot from my coccyx through my spine and sending eyes on me. I stood, and an open plastic pint of milk hit me on the left eye and cheek. The noise harmonized into grand laughter, echoing off the screaming eagle painted onto the white brick of the facing wall. With milk on my face and shirt, I knew without looking who threw it. His punishment now is that, though he is still alive, the world has forgotten him, and his name will remain absent here. (He’ll probably never have the opportunity to read this, as he’s a nothing of a person and still not inclined to read. But if by some accident he’s reading this: Congratulations on your divorce.) Adam helped me to my seat as I trembled. The laughter abated, then rose as shouts of “Dumbass” ricocheted across the rows of long tables.

Webster asked if I was all right. I nodded.

“When’s the next show?” someone shouted.

Adam climbed on the table. “Right now,” he shouted back, then stomped away from us between the orange and brown trays adorned with whatever slop they served that day. “Right
fucking now.” He stopped in the center of the table, probably twenty feet from us. The wood bowed under his weight; the room muted to a buzz. He set one foot on the tray of a frizzy blonde. “Stand up if you’ve never fallen,” he said. His voice resonated above the undirected mutter. No one was sure how to respond, least of all me. He screamed, his voice a twine of puberty’s high and low pitches, “I said stand up if you’ve never fallen.”

A few guys around the room stood; scattered laughter flitted.

“Watch,” he bellowed, and jumped and landed on the table and trays on his back. We all flinched at the impact and slap of his body. As the room gasped and teachers moved toward him, he popped up, snatched up a ninth-grade jock’s can of soda, and splashed his chest. “You’ve never done this?” he said. “You never spill all over yourselves? Who hasn’t?”

Mr. Emmis, the life-sciences teacher whose lessons and moth-eaten cardigan made the space between a woman’s legs seem as clinical and unsexy as the ear canal, now stood behind the boy whose soda had been used in the performance. “Get down from there!” he shouted.

Adam stepped further down the table and slipped his wet t-shirt over his head, bearing his pallid torso and tiny nipples to the room. He snatched a lanyard with keys from a girl’s purse and yelled out, “Does it hurt?” Then he flagellated his back three times, the keys ringing out as red welts emerged parallel to his spine. He repeated between each stroke, “Does it hurt?”

“Get down from there,” Mr. Emmis shouted again, in a high, unauthoritative pitch. He and Adam glared at one another. The room was quiet with half-sentences, utterances with no audience. No one knew whom to root for; we hated Mr. Emmis with his years-old loafers and dictatorial lectures, but we didn’t know how to take Adam’s actions. No one wanted to support him, either.
Adam stepped off the table and walked out of the cafeteria, shirtless. He didn’t look at me, but as he walked, the corners of his mouth rose to a grin as if pulled from above by invisible strings. Mr. Emmis followed him out, and we watched through the Plexiglas as they rounded a concrete corner on their way to the main office.

A stiff hand squeezed my shoulder, an epaulet. Mrs. Braun, the vice principal. Adam’s shirt was balled in her other hand, and sullenly next to her stood my nameless enemy. I shoved the remains of my lunch into the brown bag, balled it up, and walked out before her.

We waited in the main office across from the secretary as acquaintances and older students came in on errands, the peculiar honor of junior high. One could roam the halls with impunity, a messenger. We received a lot of glances, no eye contact.

I went home for the day; Adam got suspended for a week. My mother picked us both up. She made me ride in the front seat while Adam rode in the back. He’d put his shirt back on. The soda stain spread across his chest.

My mother walked Adam into his house; I went ahead into our living room and waited on the couch. I readied my posture for lecture—upright.

My mother sat on the loveseat across from me and ran her hands back through her hair. It still tangled on her head. “Tell me what happened.”

“Didn’t Mrs. Braun explain—”

“I want to hear it from you.”

I told her what had happened but left out the details of Adam’s bizarre sermon. She asked no questions as I spoke—I’d anticipated what she would ask, so my confession left nothing out. I was, in that way, a good boy.
When I finished she said, “You’re grounded. I’ll let your father decide how long. Go to your room.” I did. The whole thing seemed like a business transaction to me, but I was not one to challenge or question my mother those days.

After a while, she left to run errands. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I listened for the doors closing, then sneaked to the living room window and watched her car disappear. As soon as she was gone, I went to Adam’s.

I walked in without ringing the doorbell; Adam wouldn’t have answered. A metallic chime sounded from his room as if he acknowledged my entry with a doorbell of his own making. The stairs creaked under me, and he called out, “Mom?”

“Thomas,” I said and entered his room.

He’d changed into a clean white tee. Around him across the brown shag ranged the materials from his magic kit—a long white handkerchief, three coins, an overturned top hat with its cloth insides pouring out, a plastic wand. I picked up this last and snapped it like a whip; a plastic bouquet burst from the end.

Adam held metal rings big as halos, one in each hand. He tapped them together twice, then the third time they fused. “Voilá,” he said flatly, unimpressed with his own trick. He pulled them apart and handed them to me.

“Thanks for earlier,” I said, though I wasn’t exactly grateful.

He nodded, then popped open his fist. A tiny stuffed bunny arose, then fell to the floor.

I tapped the rings but couldn’t get them to merge. I told him I’d been grounded. I said, “How do you get these stupid things to work?”
“It’s magic,” he said and held his hands up as if balancing a plate on each, the pose of the bearded magician on the box of his kit. His short sleeves caught near his shoulder, and I saw a weird bruise on his right bicep.

“What’s that?”

He crossed his arms and tugged the sleeve. “Nothing,” he said. “I hurt my arm.”

I knew he hadn’t done that in the cafeteria. “When? Did somebody hit you?”

He said loudly no, then told me to go away. He hunched into himself. I shoved him onto his bed, wrenched his sleeve up, and squeezed both his thin wrists with one hand so I could see his arm. A red oval like Jupiter’s spot, speckled with purple and hemmed by teeth marks. His body relaxed.

“You gave yourself a hickey,” I said.

He turned his head away as if I were injecting a needle and he couldn’t bear to watch. I grazed my thumb over the mark—it felt like any other skin—and he twitched. I stood back from him. He sat back on his bed, the mottling of the shag carpet imprinted in red on his calf.

“What was it like?”

“Do it yourself and find out.”

Before I could think and stop myself, I said, “Will you give me one?”

He could have called me a fag as others at school did; he could have laughed. He could have done nothing at all. Instead, he dried his eyes with his shirt and sucked on my neck. He kept his hands on my shoulders, the space of a dictionary between our bodies. His hair smelled like wilted lettuce. The wet pinch burrowed intensity through my arms to my fingers. The sucking hurt, and my head pressed his against my shoulder. I never wrote about this in any journal, never wrote about it until now.
He stepped away and wiped his mouth. “Check it out,” he said. We went to the hall bathroom and looked in the mirror. I had a hickey on my neck, shining with his spit. I rolled a wad of toilet paper and dabbed my neck as if neatening a fresh tattoo.

“Now do me,” he said.

I gazed at his eager reflection. I was afraid—at least he’d had the practice on himself. “You’ve already got one,” I said.

“It’s easy. Kiss and suck.”

“I don’t want to.”

He stared at me. “I saved you today,” he said, then closed his eyes and shook his head, chastising himself, I could tell, for bartering with his goodness.

I put one hand on the counter for balance and my other hand on the back of his neck, and leaned in. His skin tasted like dirty salt; I suppose mine tasted the same. I kept pulling away too soon. His skin would be red but already fading by the time I looked. I’d shut my eyes each time my mouth was on his skin and tried to imagine newly busty girls at school.

After a few tries, he told me to quit. “That hurts,” he said, rubbing his neck. From his mother’s bathroom, we got a big band-aid for my hickey—strange to think of it as “my” hickey; it was his mark.

Back in his room, he picked up his magic rings again, bound them, split them. I told him I’d see him tomorrow and started to leave.

“Hey, Tommy,” he said. “We’re not gay.” He said that as if he were letting me know, by the way, it’s chilly outside, you might want a jacket.

“I know that,” I said angrily, though I was happy for his reassurance. (A note: Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* claims that 46% of males have “reacted” sexually
to other males, while 37% have had at least one homosexual experience. That makes Adam and me part of the 37% as well, I suppose, of the 46%. Given how casual contact has spread over the almost-sixty years since Kinsey’s work was published and the ease in homosocial behavior between men, those numbers are likely higher than Kinsey recorded.)

In fact, he’s right—we’re not gay. My first kiss, which I’d already had but not told Adam, was Keira Rush. Though I’d fantasized and schemed it, I hadn’t expected what came. In the summer before our seventh-grade year, Adam was visiting his grandparents, and I found myself hanging out with Keira. She lived a neighborhood away, over a mile, but played at the same park nestled at the bottom of a hill. Keira had a nice smile, was tall as me but not quite as skinny, with long, straight hair and an square face. When she ran she seemed so comfortable in her body, whereas when she stood around, she shifted her feet and seemed to rehearse what to do with her arms. We beat each other at footraces, I beat her at 21 (though only barely) on the concrete court with its chain-link basketball nets, and at the end of one exhausting day, we spun on the merry-go-round as evening came. We could see the houses on the hillside up from the park, which ones had their lights on and people moving about.

I’d pushed the merry-go-round with its metallic whine, and we sat on it as it slowed, our breath easing from the intensity of our last game. We sat in the center, resting against the bars. At the same time, we leaned in and pressed our lips flat against each other’s. Then we relaxed and explored tentatively with our tongues. She tasted like stale soda and salt. When we heard what sounded like footsteps, we split apart, then kissed again when the coast was clear. I was very aware of how dirty my hands were, balancing my body against the cold metal of the now-still merry-go-round, and I was very aware of my erection.
Afterward, we sat wordlessly, taking in the darkening surroundings. I thought pleasantly that I’d be late for dinner, and finally she said, “I should go home.” I told her I should, too, and we left.

Walking home, my lips felt the after-vibration they had after I played the trumpet. I thought some of Keira, but mostly of other people and how they would see me, what elemental change they would recognize, my aura of safety and bravery. I ran along the path and leaped to touch leaves hanging down from high branches. I would tell Adam, and he would be in awe. Five days later, though, by the time Adam got back in town, I didn’t want to confess it. Someone at the park, an older boy who seemed to be admired, called Keira a dog; from then, when we were apart I catalogued her imperfections. She was not ugly but was so plain. Of all I regret in my life, my treatment of Keira—I called her ugly three days after kissing her—bothers me most because it seems, more than any other memory from my life, like it could be a turning point, the moment I made the mistake that presaged every later mistake in my life. I left her behind.

I wish I’d kissed her again; I wish I hadn’t been troubled by her tomboy looks. She didn’t grow up into anyone particularly pretty or notable, so far as I can tell, but then again, neither did I. Occasionally, I look her up on the internet and find the same few bits of information—her job as a paralegal, her marriage to a Marine—none of which recovers my elation walking home, her warmth still on my face, a second pulse echoing in my body.

If anyone ever reads this, they may wonder what it has to do with Adam. In one sense, not a single thing. But since my relationship with him matters to the telling of his life, it matters crucially because it marks the time when my access to him waned and aspects of his history disappeared from any account I could hope to offer.
After we exchanged hickeys, our friendship probably should have ended. In a way, it did, only without our acknowledgement, the same way an engine dies but the car still rolls. We still hung out, but things were different. We didn’t talk about the hickeys; we merely took silent notice of each other’s collared shirts the next few times we saw each other. He wore a regular t-shirt his first day back at school, and at lunch he caught me checking for any trace. I thought I could see the tiny imprint of one of my teeth before his neck shifted and he looked at me. I don’t know how to describe his face. It was beyond my vocabulary of emotions then, and I guess it still is. Quixotic. Puzzled. Loving. Smug. All at once.

Maybe if I’d told him about Keira, or if we’d talked about the hickeys, or if I’d said what I thought about the son-of-God shit, then our friendship would have ended differently. After he returned to school, I had little patience for those who sought him out. Most people avoided him—they’d simply ignored him before the cafeteria incident—but we’d be walking along in the hall, or sitting at lunch, or waiting for my mother to pick us up, and someone would walk up and ask him questions. Why’d he done what he did? Did he realize how cool it was? Did he ever get in fights? Did he say anything else to Mr. Emmis? He’d become a kind of guru or minor rock star, and I was tagging along. Understand, he didn’t treat me that way; his new groupies did. I might as well have been his ugly friend. They overlooked me as if I were his kid brother, so when I could I walked away.

“How’d you have the balls to do that?” a tiny seventh-grader asked.

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “I don’t like meanness.”

“Are you afraid of anything?” a kid carrying a trombone case wanted to know.

“Of course I am,” he said, but then couldn’t or wouldn’t say what it was.
In the mornings before class, we’d walk into the courtyard and a group of five would be waiting for him. After a few weeks, they had fewer questions; they merely wanted to hear him talk. He’d bring his magic kit to school and practice before them, I think in part to dull their wonder. The tricks were so chintzy and obvious, no one should have been fooled. But the groups hung around and even grew. Even ninth graders, a year away from going to high school and being on the bottom rung yet again, came near to Adam, hoping his aura might tent over them. But these were all kids who had been picked on by someone. Their nemeses would walk past and lob insults at one or two of Adam’s disciples, only to receive as a reply Adam’s dangerously placid glare. So fewer cruelties besieged our classmates when they stood with Adam.

I asked him what he thought of his admirers. He laughed. “It’s cool,” he said. “I mean, it’s weird, but I can help people.” He kept his answers to me as modest as that. I held tight the story of my kiss with Keira, and he held secret something beyond my knowing.

A couple of months after Adam’s cafeteria outburst, my nemesis approached our group in the courtyard. “Hey, Adam, right? Can I talk to you about something?”

Adam gave his assent.

“I mean in private. Come with me.” He stepped away.

“We can talk right here,” Adam said, and people started to drift, giving space for privacy.

“No,” Nameless said. “Let’s go this way.” And he departed, turning down the dark sciences hall. It was still more than fifteen minutes before first period, so teachers wouldn’t be in their classrooms, and the dark halls would be empty. Adam stood his ground. He knew he would get jumped. I could see he was afraid, so I followed nameless, probably my greatest act of bravery. It’s hard to convey how fearsome the hallways were at our junior high. There were race
fights between whites bused in from the county and blacks who lived within walking distance of
the school; bigger kids would appear in a circle around you in the hallway and repeatedly punch
you in the stomach or back so your bruises wouldn’t show. As you walked through the halls,
hearing the lockers slam and the resonance of bodies shoved against lockers, your fear bullied
you as much as the bullies. In the mornings, the hallways were almost as dark as night, as empty
and daunting as the alleyways of nightmares. Between classes, though, they were a
claustrophobe’s horror, noisy and full as a city.

I went down that dim hallway, the lights above aged yellow coils that kept their glow to
themselves. Silhouetted figures were pressed against the lockers. Nameless approached me. “I
don’t want to talk to you.”

The silhouettes peeled from the lockers. They were legion, the pigs. Adam was right to
avoid them. I turned and walked back into the courtyard’s safe sunlight. Adam looked at me as if
I returned as the prodigal son.
Four—

That failed and growing scaffolding of the flesh housed the teenage spirit of Adam the savior. Endowed with the wisdom and power of God but invested in the weakness of Man, he led himself into temptation. Thus could he offer solace and understanding of the sin of others. He knew flesh in order to save the spirit.

As did those he deigned to save, Adam attended schools. Once at mealtime, like the Messiah among the moneychangers, Adam entered that place and saw those who were cruel in body and in spirit. Those who did not see the way and word of God were cruel to Adam’s Apostle, so Adam rose upon the tables to speak. Though that place was not holy as was the temple in which Christ demonstrated the truth of God, Adam knew and said, “As Christ said, ‘Your body is a temple of the holy Spirit.’”

Because they did not know what Adam was, they laughed. He took off his shirt and flagellated his own back, drawing blood from the temple of his flesh. Welts rose on his skin. “Who here has not fallen?” Those who could not understand scoffed. “Who here,” he repeated, “has not fallen?” The crowd stood amazed.

“Jesus fell,” he said, “as all of us must fall. And who among us will rise? Who will rise?”

The false teachers who did not understand interrupted his sermon and took Adam and his Apostle to their place of punishment. While they waited in the place, Adam asked the Apostle, “Did you understand?”

The Apostle said, “Yes,” but Adam could see that he did not.
“You do not,” Adam said. “So I will not tell you the authority by which I do these things.”

Five—

The school’s administrators sent Adam away, but when he returned, new disciples came to him. They came to ask questions and learn. Adam performed for them magic tricks as he answered questions, the sleight-of-hand that reveals nothing but the limitations of human vision. He bound three metal rings together, then pulled them apart. “These are nothing but tricks,” he said as he showed how they worked. They did not know who or what he was, they only followed his appeal.

One day, as he answered questions about God to one who claimed that Christ is King, Adam said, “Jesus Christ was a man.”

“But Jesus wasn’t just a man,” the questioner replied. “Jesus is Lord. Christ is King.” Adam said, “Jesus is no Lord, and Christ is no King.”

The questioner stood appalled. “How can you deny Christ?” “I do not deny Christ,” Adam replied, serene. “I deny Lordship. I deny Kingship. We are neither serfs nor subjects. There is no kingdom come.”

“But we are servants of God,” the boy decried. “The Bible says so.” “And what does God tell you to do?”

“Do good,” the boy said. “What the Bible tells me to do.” “No,” Adam said, “there is much in the Bible we do not do. The law has changed and grown, and the Bible is the honorable word of man. We are not servants of God, but seekers of God.”
“But the Bible says—” the questioner began, but tranquil Adam interrupted. “Have you heard? What littered words of God have you picked up? I have heard. I have listened, and I have spoken.”

The questioner was angry. “Who are you? Do you think you can replace God’s law?”

“No,” Adam said. “I have not come to replace, abolish, or fulfill God’s law. For God has no law. God needs no law, for God has no needs. When Christ came and said he fulfilled the law, he meant the law of man, which is mankind’s way of beginning to understand God. But because law is a creation of man, it is often false, misleading, a misunderstanding.”

Incredulous the questioner asked, “So God does not judge? God has no credo?”

“No as men do,” Adam said. “Jesus came to guide the human law, but we misstep. As those who built the Tower of Babel misunderstood the purpose of the sky, those who have come since Christ have failed to understand the law.”

Six—

As Adam’s disciples increased, his first Apostle grew distant.
Fifteen and hormone-rattled, we loitered at our town’s community center, strip malls, parks, looking for girls, looking for anything to do. Bereft of the mandatory time spent in the school buildings housing the torture of female scents, we leered at public swimming pools when we weren’t playing Marco Polo, attaching ourselves to groups of neighborhood or school acquaintances, then detaching ourselves when we left. I remember talking very little that summer. I’d grown gangly and acned and tended toward the bookish; Adam became stoic and insular. June spoke to my mother in our kitchen, unconcerned about my hearing, about Adam’s reticence. He didn’t seem troubled to her (or to me) except for momentary storms, but he was contentedly quiet.

Adam’s older cousin Eric lived an hour away, and June called and asked if he would come spend the night, hang out with Adam. Eric was seventeen, and I’d heard about him but never met him. He was related not on June’s side, but through the absent and unaccounted-for Daniel Ellison. (Understand that, given the question of Adam’s father, I use the term cousin loosely.) June’s sister-in-law blamed her for her brother’s disappearance, even though their family tree rotted with insanity—root rot. I assumed Eric heard the worst, true or not, about June and Adam.

Around five, a rust-spotted ’67 Mustang with a deathly muffler rattle pulled into the Ellison driveway. I watched from our kitchen as two teenagers got out, one in a baggy T-shirt that billowed in the wind and with what appeared to be severe acne scars, the other a fat, boyishly handsome guy in plaid flannel and worn jeans. They were a poor man’s humorless Laurel and Hardy. They moseyed up to the Ellisons’ door—they had moseying down to an art—
and disappeared inside the house. A few minutes later, Adam rang our doorbell. From the way he asked if I wanted to come to dinner, I could tell he needed me to say yes. I went.

June had worked to impress Eric. I wowed at the smell of chicken slow-baked in rosemary, the glimmer of dusted tables. The fuzzed dust that adorned their framed photos had gone; the television shone. I said, “It’s super-clean in here,” and June replied, “I try.” She wanted Eric to think she always kept the house this clean, that messages of approval would go back to her in-laws, as absent from her life as they were, as meaningless to her well-being as they had always been.

The teenage pair rose from the couch for introductions. Eric was the thin one in the baggy tee. I couldn’t help staring at his pocked face.

“I got sprayed with buckshot. Hunting. But I was back out later that day.” Part brag, part infamy. His demeanor was acidic.

Eric’s friend clapped me on the shoulder with his fat hand and smiled. “Shannon,” he said. He had a friendly, honest smile and the cold odor of anti-perspirant.

“Everybody calls him Toothy.”

“I used to have an overbite. Call me Shannon.”

Eric, Shannon, Adam, and I sat in the living room as June finished prepping dinner. Shannon tried his hand at small talk about school, you got a girlfriend, why not.

We all ate quickly, quietly, hunched over our plates. Eric and Shannon mouthed forkfuls of food, nodding to indicate that they enjoyed the meal when June asked what they thought. Adam and I ate primly. After dinner, Eric said, “Well, what do you gentlemen want to do this evening?”
Hang out, one of us said. June told us boys to have a good time as we headed out the door.

The black vinyl backseat had no seatbelts, and the heat in the car overwhelmed us along with its gas-station smell. Shannon peered at us from the passenger seat. “Better hold on to something,” he said. Eric turned the key, revved the engine twice, and sped backwards out of the driveway. He cut turns close; Adam and I slid and tried to brace ourselves by holding the backs of the seats in front of us. “How are you babies doing back there?” he asked after a curve crushed us together. “Don’t worry. You’ll get your bottles later.”

He drove to Lake Edelstein, the town’s public park where teenagers got wasted on weekends. I had only been during the day, when it looked abandoned. Concrete bunkers shaped like giant bells rose from the grassless earth. The area had served as munitions storage in the 1950’s; after the military abandoned it, the town converted it, adding winding asphalt paths and wooden docks for fishing. Each spring, they stocked the lake with fish, most of which washed dead to the shore. That was completely natural for the first few years, city officials said. Eric parked in the lot beside the thirty-yard long concrete tunnel that had crabgrass growing on top of it. Adam and I ran inside to yell out phrases. “Echo,” I said, the word resonating against the legible and illegible graffiti. “Luke, I am your father.”

“Catastrophe,” Adam said, “check. Catastrophe.”

“You fags are dorks,” Eric called from his car.

Adam belted out “Amen,” and we walked out of the tunnel. They pulled from the trunk of the Mustang four bottles, and they slid two into their back pockets. Shannon pulled out a mop bucket full of mud-caked golf balls and a couple of wooden golf clubs.

“What are those for?” I asked.
“Making snow angels, dipshit,” Eric said.

The sun had disappeared over the horizon, leaving a smear of pink across the sky. The park’s lights ticked on, buzzing as they warmed.

Adam asked what was in the bottles. Shannon took each of his bottles out and displayed the one in his right hand like a salesman. “In this hand, we’ve got peach schnapps, the bringer of light and pussy.” The label flashed light from a streetlamp as he shook the bottle. Then he held out the other, which had a grainy red fluid inside and the remnants of a peeled label. “And in this hand, we’ve got Everclear mixed with what you probably carry in your lunch boxes everyday—Kool-Aid.”

Eric slammed shut the trunk. “That’s Jim Jones shit,” he said. “It’ll fuck you up if you aren’t man enough.”

Adam flinched—we’d never talked about Jonestown or his aunt Sharon—then reached for the bottle of Everclear, but Shannon jerked it away and smiled. “You’ve got to earn it first,” he said. He swigged it, then passed it to Eric, who sipped long, then breathed his toxic breath in my face.

“Let’s go make some fucking noise,” Eric said.

I both despised him and thought he was much cooler than me. I knew he was trying far too hard, yet I wanted to impress him. I hollered, some senseless war whoop, and Shannon said, “That’s the spirit.” Adam curled his lips inward and looked away from me.

Shannon handed me the heavy bucket of balls to caddy around and rested one of the golf clubs on his shoulder. Eric held his down by his side like a fly swatter.

We walked around the lake, Eric and Shannon talking shit about people they knew at school and didn’t like, the girls who put out, who they’d gotten some with and how it ranked on
a ten-point scale. When I cracked a joke about the little dick of someone they didn’t like, Eric
said, “What do you know about it?” But Shannon handed me the bottle of red liquid. I sipped it,
the Kool-Aid tart on my tongue but the Everclear a noxious burn in my throat and nose. Eric
laughed and told me to drink it like a man, so despite the hot ache in the center of my chest, I
swallowed a mouthful. I bent over and wheezed for air as the mix dribbled off my lips and onto
my ’84 Summer Olympics tank top. They laughed, even Adam.

“That shit’s good,” I said.

“That shit’s good,” Adam echoed, an almost perfect imitation of my voice.

We walked twenty minutes, past the netless sand volleyball courts, the swings and slides
and rusted grills, all the way to the far side of the lake. About two hundred yards away from the
asphalt path began a new neighborhood, a secluded area of upper-class homes-to-be. The
windows had been put in. Shannon teed up a golf ball, and Eric handed me a driver.

“Gentlemen,” Shannon said, “let’s fuck shit up.”

I’d never swung a golf club in my life. The grip was torn, the wood and rubber against my palm
as I clenched the club like a baseball bat.

“Remember,” Eric said, “that’s a long way. So swing for the fences.”

I set my feet into the soft dirt, eyed the ball I’d measured to be equidistant from both my
feet, then swung as hard as I could. It dribbled a few feet in front of me. Eric and Shannon
laughed; Adam smiled. I re-teed and steadied my feet. Then I held out my hand to Shannon, who
had out the Peach Schnapps. “For good luck,” I said. He shrugged and let me drink. It was
sweeter than the Everclear, not as hot a burn.

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, then focused on the ball. We only had the light of the
moon and stars where we were and the weak glow of distant lamps, and against the dark grass,
the ball was a blue spot. I swung, less hard, and thwacked the ball away. It flew straight out, then banked hard right.

“Fore,” Eric yelled into the night. He stepped up and took the club from me. He set a ball on the tee, lined up, and hooked the ball far into the night, where it disappeared. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“That’s in the rough,” Shannon said.

“Shove it, Toothy. Adam, you game?”

Adam took the club, and Eric balanced a ball on the tee. Adam set himself, then reared back and swung. The white orb on the tee exploded forward its yellow membranous yolk. A smear spread around his jeans like cuffs. Eric, Shannon, and I bowed laughing—I couldn’t help it.

“You laugh now,” he said. I knew the verse—“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”

As Eric’s and Shannon’s laughter decrescendoed, Adam teed a dirt-caked ball from the bucket, reared back, and swung as hard as he could. The ball vanished.

Amidst giggles, Eric said, “I didn’t see where it went.”

“It went,” Adam said.

Shannon shambled to Adam, put his arm around him, and extended the bottle of red poison. “Don’t take it too hard. At least you earned your own bottle.”

We walked further around the lake, Adam sharing his Everclear and Kool-Aid with me. Eric and Shannon stopped occasionally to hit balls into the lake, Eric shouting, “It’s in the drink!” each time. They hit the final ball in, then Eric slung the bucket and the clubs into the lake. When Adam and I were a safe distance from them, I asked what had happened to the ball
he hit. He slipped one from his pocket and exhibited it on the tips of his fingers like a jewel. It was perfectly clean, gleaming in the dark. “Magic trick,” he said. Then he swigged from his bottle and handed it to me.

“Swapping spit the original way, boys?” Eric called to us. He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger and penetrated it the index finger of his other hand. We couldn’t see Shannon. The dark trees to our right shook. “These woods are haunted, ladies,” Eric shouted, then ran past us and around the curve of the path where we couldn’t see him.

“Don’t be scared,” Shannon’s voice exclaimed from the woods. “Hold on to each other.”

Adam and I walked on and tried to ignore them as they went silent. The woods cooed, and branches snapped off. Even knowing it was them, I was scared. But I was also drunk, tipsy at least, my senses filmed over by alcohol, each step I took accompanied by its own waves of unease and pleasure.

We neared the end of the woods as the asphalt path curled left, continuing to edge the lake. Eric and Shannon screamed and ran as if ejected from the trees. I jumped despite what I knew was coming.

“Pussies,” Eric said.

“Come on,” Shannon said, again coiling an arm around Adam’s shoulders, “these boys are on their long, slow way to becoming men. I could even envision them getting laid in the next few years.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Eric said. “Hold your dicks.”

Down the hill away from the lake arose the skeleton of a church being built. We skidded down, gravity yanking us as we balanced backwards, our hands against the rocky ground, to keep from rolling down. We all howled, even Adam, at the drunk difficulty of getting down and
staying on our feet. Shannon slipped onto his ass and slid a few feet before righting himself again and making it to the bottom with the rest of us. He brushed the mud and gravel from his jeans, then bowed and said, “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I am the lizard king.”

We walked between the beams into the dark church. Pine panels comprised the floor, and only the east wall was closed. Past what would be the entrance towered scaffolding around the steeple. Outside sat heavy yellow equipment, asleep for the night.

“Hallelujah,” Shannon yelled. It echoed off the one wall and into the night.

“Somebody ought to christen this place,” Eric said. He walked to where the pulpit might stand, unzipped his pants, and delivered a fluid sermon.

“Hey,” I said, “you can’t do that. This place is sacred.”

Eric zipped up. “It is now. Every time the preacher preaches, my anointing will rise up and bless all the good people in their Sunday best.” He belched. “Stupid fuckers.”

“This space would be perfect for a football game,” Shannon said. He dropped back like a quarterback and handed off an empty bottle into my belly. I held the bottle and stood. “Dude,” he said, “run.”

I posed as the Heisman trophy.

“That’s my boy,” he said.

We wandered out of the church, all of us tipsy or drunk, and clambered back up the hill to the path. We’d finished what they’d brought from the car. Eric and Adam looked sullen; I could almost see a relation in their faces, a certain narrow point of the chin in profile. Part of me wanted to shove Adam; I had a leering anger toward him. But at the same time, we were each other’s only reliable protection against Eric’s meanness and Shannon’s goofy pranks.
We were, that is, until Shannon put his arm around Adam and led him away toward one of the unused, spray-painted bunkers. “I need to explain a couple of things to this here young man,” he said to Eric. “Give him the unabridged birds and bees.”

Eric waved him away and mumbled something. The other two shrank in the distance, then disappeared around the corner of the bunker. Eric watched them as if he were planning something. His scar looked ragged in the starlight. I skipped rocks on the lake.

“Are there any more eggs?” I asked.

He smirked at me, his thumbs hooked on the front pockets of his jeans. “You know, I like you. You’re smart.” He put his arm around me the way Shannon had done to Adam. Like a mentor. His hand seemed greasy on my arm, and I wanted to run. He leaned in to kiss me; I ducked away and stepped back to arm’s length. He smiled. “Friends got to practice with friends,” he said. “It’s the only way you’re going to get any good at it. Doesn’t mean anything.”

I thought of the hickey Adam had given me, that hot pulse against my neck, suddenly afraid Eric knew. But he couldn’t have. He grabbed me and kissed me hard on the mouth, his teeth bumping mine, and his prickly stubble rubbed the side of my mouth.

I pulled away. “Faggot,” I said and spit on the ground.

“Don’t call me a faggot,” he said and shoved me. I tripped backward over my tipsy feet and landed on my tailbone. He straddled me. A rock dug into my shoulder. “You tell me you and my cousin aren’t a pair? I see how you two are.” I slapped at him, and he held down my hands. He was strong for being so bony. “It’s okay,” he said. “Every guy does it.” He massaged my palms with his thumbs, then bent down and kissed me again. His tongue flirted with my lips.

I let my body go limp. He relaxed, too, and I kneed him in the crotch. He crumpled to my belly, then slapped me. I kneed him again, kept pressing my leg upward, and he rolled off
whimpering. I ran down the hill toward the church being built, my legs luckily agile. “I’m going to beat the fuck out of you,” he wailed after me.

When I reached the church, I couldn’t see him, but I knew he’d be coming after me. I didn’t know where else to go. I’d gone further from Shannon and Adam, and I didn’t know what they were doing. But now I had to save myself. I climbed the scaffolding of the steeple like a ladder—halfway up, I could see Eric climbing to his feet—and curled into myself at the top, coated in sawdust and the cool of the board. Wind rattled the scaffolding, aided by the alcohol swirling me. I remembered suddenly a time when I was six, when I’d fallen asleep in the living room and woke up in my father’s arms as he carried me to bed.

Eric’s steps clumped in the church below and resonated up the scaffolding and through the ends of my body. I prayed silently to God for salvation. I mouthed the words, “Save me.”

“Where the fuck are you, you little piece of shit?” Eric screamed. His voice had filaments of a higher pitch, probably from anger as much as from being kneed. “Come out so I can beat the shit out of you.” He stomped around the empty church, then scuffed around the outside, slapping the beams with his palm.

The wind kept up, and moment I thought I might fall. I imagined my death, my funeral pitiful with only a handful of mourners.

“Fine,” he called out. “But you can’t hide your lover boy. My cousin’s going to get his and yours, too.”

He ran off, and I was horrified for Adam. “God,” I whispered, “please help him.”

Nothing signaled a change. I knew I would have to act. “God,” I said, “please give me the courage.” My stomach clenched, and I vomited a milky line of fluid. “God,” I said, “please. I need your courage.” In my cowardice, I betrayed Adam and waited for an answer.
And heard nothing. I was certain he was doomed, and I would let him be. As I lay there, waiting for bravery, I realized God would not answer my call; God could not answer. I had no idea what happened below, and I was powerless to find out. I knew God did not abandon me; my faith in God did. As the scaffolding rattled and life itself seemed uncertain, God ceased to exist.
Chapter and Verse: The Conversion of the Doubter

Seven—

Adam and his lost apostle travelled to a park with two vagabonds. It was night, the stars aloft and world around asleep. The vagabonds, a cousin of Adam’s and a friend of the cousin, endeavored to exhibit the life of the body, the incursion of alcohol that disanchors the spirit.

“Come,” they said, “let’s make trouble.”

So they circled a lake, the vagabonds taunting Adam and his lost apostle with their false image of adulthood, their irreverent bravado. Whenever the lost apostle imitated that bravado in idolatry, Adam mocked him. “Take that path if you must,” he said.

And the cousin took the lost apostle aside at a distance, and Adam went with the cousin’s friend in another direction.

Eight—

“What do you want?” Adam said to the vagabond. “I want to show you a world,” the vagabond said. “Everything you’ve ever wanted is in it.” Adam shook his head. “There is no world left for me to see.”

The vagabond leaned in to kiss Adam, but Adam held up a hand and said, “No.” The vagabond threatened violence: “I will hurt you.”

Adam swept this threat aside, and the vagabond felt his power to hurt dissipate. “Who are you?” asked the vagabond. “I am,” said Adam, “the cousin of your friend. I am also a man, and I am also the second son of God.”
The vagabond demanded proof, and Adam said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” “Then,” said the vagabond, “it would be stupid to believe.” Newly endowed with his power to hurt, he stood and threatened. “Show me what you are.”

Adam pointed to a dark tree in the distance. The moon and stars gilt the night. A bird’s nest fell from the tree, and when it hit the ground, an egg, white as the moon, rose up and flew into the distance, then hatched into a dove.

The vagabond, awed, seated himself, his gaze latched onto the space in the distance where the dove had hatched. “Who are you?”

Nine—

Adam lowered himself to face the vagabond. “The true question, who and what are you?” The vagabond’s head dropped as if burdened by a great weight. “I don’t know.”

Adam laughed. “Of course you do. Sing your life’s litany.” And the vagabond spoke of himself—the legion of sufferings in his life, the anguish and personae and falsehood, the veneration of his false self. “I don’t know what to do,” he said. “Do you have the power to save me?”

“Yes and no,” Adam said. “I can only save those who wish to save themselves and act upon that wish.” The vagabond asked, “What does that mean?” And Adam replied, “It means you do most of the work. Imagine a spider on a ceiling. It repels down the web it extends. Then it climbs back up. You can be that spider.” “But how do I make a web?” the vagabond asked.

Adam laid hands on the vagabond’s chest. “Are you true in your heart?”

The vagabond’s face endured contortions, for he feared giving a dishonest answer. “I don’t know.”
“Close your eyes,” Adam said, “for this is not a question of knowledge. Are you true in your heart?”

The vagabond closed his eyes and let his breath pause as Joseph once held the sky still over Gibeon. And the vagabond avenged himself on his fears and said, “I am true in my heart.”

And so, years later, the vagabond, then no longer a vagabond, was a disciple of Adam.
January 14: Schism

So begin the years of Adam’s life in which he recedes from any biography. My mother called the police—I contend, despite my father’s end-of-life claim, that it was she who called—who were annoyed to deal with two hapless out-of-town rednecks and two local junior high schoolers, all coming down off our highs, and one impossible to find. When the police cruiser arrived and blipped its lights, Shannon and Adam stepped forward. After a few minutes, they found Eric, stumbling and pissed, muttering to the devils on his shoulders. The officer had to cuff him and shove him in the back of the cruiser, then set off with Shannon and Adam to find me.

And where was I? After feeling the absence of God, I pulled at the strings of the ragged explanations I had that proved God existed, and they unraveled. Perhaps because I was drunk it was easier than it would have been otherwise. But God was gone. He’d skipped town, taken the life savings, and invented a new name for himself. Maybe Daniel Ellison was God, and Adam’s father. Adam, for all his genius, had no clue where I was. Without God, I’d passed out, even on that wind-tossed structure.

I came to as the cop clomped through the church, swerving his flashlight into the corners below. “Thomas Miller?” he called out, followed by Adam’s “Tommy?” Even now I can hear the terror in his voice.

I gurgled out a hello, and the three searching for me ringed the bottom of the scaffold. Eric’s absence relieved me. I was still a little drunk, but the sobriety that rushed back did so in the form of my fear of heights. I peered down over the edge, and the scaffolding seemed to tip forward. I drew back, adrenaline-fueled and coated in a new layer of anxious sweat, despite the
cold, and I vomited. A searing, sweet mess that curled over the lip of the platform and fell to earth. When the God of Genesis destroyed the Tower of Babel and fragmented the speaking world, he had to create something in the absence of a common language to bind his human creation together: the fear of heights.

The fear that had helped me climb was gone. The metal rattled in the wind. “We won’t let you fall,” Shannon called up. Coming from him, that didn’t help. I imagined my body splayed on the concrete below, my limbs bent in cartoon ways, my head a split melon. “I’m scared.”

“I’ll come get you,” the cop said, and the clang of his foot against a rung resonated so fully through my body that I set myself in motion, my feet finding steps, my arms curling around the scaffold’s cold steel. My descent was slower than slow. When I got to the bottom, my face was masked with snot, the remains of vomit, and tears. No one could look at me, Adam least of all.

Because I didn’t know what had happened between Adam and Shannon, because I didn’t know what the cop knew or where Eric was or what he’d claimed, I told them that he’d tried to fight me, that I’d gotten in a lucky kick and run for dear life. I used the phrase, “I ran for dear life,” having heard it several times on television, and immediately worried that the cliché would provide the peephole for them to see through my story. But they seemed to believe it, or at least the cop did. And when we got to the cruiser, Eric belted out, “What did that faggot say about me?” The cop called another officer, who drove me and Adam home; Eric and Shannon spent the night in jail, presumably sobering up. They weren’t charged with anything serious, but the cops didn’t invite them back to town.

At home, Adam and I were in trouble. June’s anger, from what I understand, focused more on Eric than on Adam. Mainly she was relieved her son was okay. She grounded Adam for
the alcohol on his breath, but only for a few days. He would’ve spent the time inside anyway. But my mother went from relieved to livid in just two breaths. “I was so worried I called the police,” she said, “and you were out drinking and doing God knows what.”

As my mother veered from anxiety to anger, my father stood beside her as her silent spine.

The next morning, I begged out of going to the grocery with my mother, so Adam and I had our houses to ourselves. As soon as her bumper disappeared onto Tiller Street, I slipped over to Adam’s and let myself in. A nerf earth, green and blue, bounced down the stairs and met me at the bottom step. I carried it back up to Adam’s room.

He had an encyclopedia open and was copying down information from it. He informed me he was grounded.

“How you feeling?” I asked. My first hangover had set up camp, pitched a tent in my head and set a campfire high in my throat.

“Okay,” he said. It was like talking to the receptionist at school—he had better things to do.

I stepped his old school desk, which they’d long had in their garage, the chair welded to it. The lid opened upward, and he could store things inside. I’d never seen anything but school notebooks inside. At that moment, I imagined a treasure trove of secrets. Darkened grooves were carved into the top, along with the letters E, M, J, and D clockwise around a plus sign, all framed within a heart.

“What happened between you and Shannon last night?”
He finally looked up at me. I set the foam earth against the top of the encyclopedia, open to “Alcohol poisoning.” “Nothing,” he said. He set down his pencil in the valley of the encyclopedia’s recto and verso. “We chatted for a minute, then the policeman showed up and flashed his lights at us.”

“Did you kiss?” I stood over him like a teacher.

He picked up his pencil and peeled the rolled rubber leavings from the eraser. “Did you and my cousin kiss?”

“He held me down and stuck his gross tongue down my throat. Then I kneed him in the balls and ran off. That’s how I ended up on that scaffold.” I’d never been so direct, so truthful, especially a scene of such humiliation, even though I’d been the victim. “What happened to you?”

“You’re afraid of heights. How’d you climb that scaffold?”

“I had nowhere to go but up,” I said. “So Shannon tried to kiss you.”

“Nothing like that,” he said. “I converted him.”

I waited for more as he gazed at his slanted left-handed script. “Converted him to what?”

We’d reached an age of instinctive skepticism, where so many people lied or tried to prank you that instinctive denial was a necessity. I dared him with my silence to mention his God the father, and he dared me with his silence to deny him. On the wall facing him hung a wooden cross the size of our adolescent palms, a tiny, sinewy Jesus the same mahogany color crucified upon it.

“Converted him to what?”

He merely shook his head.
"You know what I learned last night?" I said. "God doesn’t exist. Your playtime daddy isn’t anything."

I said that to provoke him, but he showed the steadiness of the sun. "So this is how you leave me. You’ll come back to me, but for now, I’m glad you’re going."

"Fuck you," I said. I’d never said it to anyone.

"Nevertheless," he said.

"There is no God," I said, wanting desperately to rattle him as he had me. I wanted to convert him to my uncertainty. "There is no God."

"But one," he said. His face and neck reddened. "Now get the fuck out of my house."

I got the fuck out. And so began my first separation from Adam and my atheism. I left his house assuming Shannon had tried to do to Adam what Eric did to me, but by some luck and the bleeps of the police cruiser, Adam suffered little or nothing. But he seemed convinced that he’d converted Shannon to something somehow, but other what I saw as Adam’s delusions about himself, I couldn’t see what Adam meant. My anger at Adam for abandoning me—for letting Eric do what he did and for keeping secret his “conversion”—turned to an anger at God and religion. That, anyway, is the short version. The less short, but not too long, version: the emotional jolt of God’s absence as I lay curled on that scaffolding converted to questions about what I actually knew of God. I observed the daily movement of the world, the earthquakes and weather disasters, the mother flicking and reflicking her lighter to ignite her cigarette in the smoldering mall parking lot as she ignored her child, the absence of anything sentient in the sky other than birds. I looked into the Bible’s contradictions, the ones I’d noted mutely before and accepted as part of the whole, exactly as I accepted my mother’s and father’s mood swings as part of who they were.
That first Saturday night after our night out with Eric and Shannon, I lay on the couch watching TV with my parents, a sad habit we’d fallen into. My father was deep into a series of complex, unwinnable games of Solitaire—not the Solitaire everyone knows and has pre-loaded onto the blank slate of their computer, but Byzantine, erudite variations that required patience to teach and learn, neither of which my father and I were equipped with—and my mother had nodded off in her chair. She snored herself awake, then stood and said, “I’m heading to bed. Church tomorrow.”

I hadn’t seen Adam in person since our split, other than from the safety of my window, and the thought of meeting him in church, that place of myths I’d disavowed, well, it did what one might expect. “I don’t think I’m going.”

My mother was so tired, it took her a moment to recognize what I’d said. “Why not?”

“I’m grounded.”

“You’re going.” My father said that, strangely enough, not my mother. He didn’t even look up.

My mother silenced the television, the screen still buzzing faintly with images. “Why don’t you want to go to church?”

I told her it was boring, that I wasn’t sure I saw any use in it. I glanced to my father to back me up on this, but he looked up to the ceiling as if figuring math in his head. I stayed prone on the couch, warm with angry resistance but wearing what I hoped was a mask of nonchalance, saying that if I didn’t believe I had the right not to go. “It’s in the Constitution,” I said. (I acknowledge that I was an irritating little smartass.)
“Congress shall make no law,” my father said, “respecting whether or not Thomas Robert Miller’s parents can make him go to church. Why don’t you go so we can ensure domestic tranquility?”

“You’re going,” my mother said. “Good night.”

After her footfall in the hallway above died, my father asked, “What’s this about?”

I got up and turned the television volume back on.

The next morning, my father rather than my mother woke me. He knocked on the door frame and said, “Up?” He stood in the doorway until I rolled over and opened my eyes. Fifteen minutes later, he stepped into my room and said, “Thomas, up.”

I asked why I had to attend church.

He eased shut the door. “You don’t want to go to church, you don’t have to. But you’ve got to give your mother a little more warning than twelve hours. You can’t ambush her.” I kept my eyes pressed shut. I knew he was right but wanted to wait it out. He asked, “You want to tell me what this is about?”

I got up, showered, and dressed. My Sunday best—plaid shirt tucked precisely in, thin dress socks, penny loafers that curled my toes and rubbed blisters into the backs of my heels. My mother always made a nice pre-church breakfast as her mother had—blueberry pancakes and bacon for us, though my grandmother evidently created something much more elaborate that required rising before the sun. Usually, my mother would either plate my food for me when I came into the kitchen or I’d find one on the stove. But that morning, on our round kitchen table I’d been stubbing my knees and toes against more and more, sat lonely a white plate with misshapen pancakes, discs with bulbous growths. My father had made them. They were room temperature.
I was slathering my last one with maple syrup and butter when my mother came into the kitchen. She tossed a perfunctory “Morning,” my way, and went straight for the coffee maker. After pouring her cup, she worked at the clasp of one earring, then the other, then double-checked them both. (At the reception after her funeral, tackily open casket—all open caskets are tacky, in part because of the waxy makeup that replaces the actual person with an image you can’t trust—I focused on the empty piercings of her earlobes, the elongated creases that gravity’s pull on her earrings had stretched from holes to slits over the years. The corpse artist had dressed her, thickened her hair, tanned her skin and made up her face, yet the jewelless hole of her right ear drew all my attention. I reached down and tweezed it with my finger, the cartilage thin, the back of her ear greasy, and a small stir arose when a woman friend of my mother’s said, “Honey, no,” and people checked to see what, if anything, I’d done to the body of the mother I loved.) I don’t remember what dress she wore that morning, but I remember the work she did on those earrings, which she would have done all morning had I not said, “You look nice,” despite wondering why all this ostentation was necessary for church—the clothes, the jewelry, the light mist of perfume that had come into the kitchen with her, the genteel calm with which we masked our weariness.

She smiled at me, kissed me wetly on the forehead, then rubbed her lipstick off my brow. “Don’t you look handsome,” she said. Not a word of our tensions, though they were drawn in relief by the noise of my father’s morning ablutions running through the pipes.

Done with breakfast, I rinsed my plate clean, then placed it in the dishwasher.

“Honey,” she said, “you want to go see if the Ellisons’ are ready?” She always referred to them in that odd formal way on Sunday mornings but rarely at any other time.
I hesitated, but I didn’t want to disturb our détente, so I went. Past our bed of hostas and Russian sage, past June’s heat-hunched astilbes, up the Ellisons’ cracked concrete steps (ours were cracked, too; that’s no judgment), to press their lightless doorbell. I whispered “Mrs. Ellison” as a superstitious mantra to make her answer, not Adam, because he always did on Sunday mornings. But I listened ear-to-the-door and heard nothing. Often, the chime’s echo would be June calling, “Adam, doorbell,” even though one could hear it anywhere in the house; perhaps he needed that extra noise to shake him from whatever reverie he was in. But no one answered. I climbed the bricks on the side of a house a couple of feet and peered into the glass at the top of their garage door. No car.

In our kitchen, my father patted his pants pockets—keys, wallet, notebook and pen—and my mother draped her hair behind her ears.

“They’re gone,” I said. “They left already.”

“No they aren’t,” my mother said.

“Fine, their car went to church without them.”

My mother glared at me as if it were my fault.

We ran into them at church; we were going in, they were coming out. June was effortless politesse, my mother apologetic anxiety. June and Adam had come for the early service so they could run errands after. He and I kept our distance from one another, and my father, I saw, took note. Given an unanswered question, he could be perceptive.

I don’t remember church that day. At home, I skipped lunch and took a nap.

Bleary on waking, I went to my father’s office and stood in the doorway. He had his pencil poised over paper, feinting toward writing. “Dad?” I said. He held up his left index finger, then the pencil (he was left-handed) and tapped the air between us like a conductor catching the
attention of his orchestra. “Dad,” I said, “I need to talk to you.” He set pencil on pad and rolled it up and down the page with his index fingers. “Come on in.”

In the far corner, he had an old regal-looking chair he’d bought at a flea market, his “reading chair,” though he’d only tried reading in it once. It was heavy with dark and scarred wooden legs and green leather on the arms, seat, and back, attached with brass upholstery tacks. I dragged it to face my father’s desk. The seat collapsed beneath me; it was like sitting in a hole, why my father never used it.

I was still in my Sunday best, now sleep-wrinkled, my shirt half-tucked. “I don’t want to go to church anymore.” With my toes I pawed at one of his desk’s elaborate feet that curled like the bases of Corinthian columns. I told him I didn’t really believe in God anymore, that I wasn’t getting anything out of church.

He listened, his mind either intensely on me or what he’d been doing before I interrupted. When I finished, he asked, “Does this have anything to do with Adam?”

Sometimes you think no one is watching, that you’re in your own little bubble and the rest of the world is oblivious. Caught in a similar way by my father, who’d quickly sussed out that Adam was involved, I nodded: this had something to do with Adam. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Do you want to tell me later?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah.”

He suggested I tell her calmly why that I didn’t want to go to church. I did so, and she accepted the resignation I tendered. I’d never asked my father to intervene with my mother
before, but I found his help quietly successful. Three weeks later, my father stopped also going
to church with her, and she continued to go alone—with June and Adam.

The first morning my father stayed home from church, I told him what happened to my
friendship with Adam. I awoke a few moments before my mother left. I lay in bed and listened to
plates and cutlery clinking into the dishwasher, then the door that led from the hallway to the
garage whining open, then exhaling and slapping shut. The garage door growled open, the engine
turned over reluctantly and receded, and the garage growled closed. Warm in my sheets, I was at
home in the church of everyday sounds, a little proud I didn’t go to church.

I got out of bed, assuming I was alone. I poured a bowl of cereal, clicked on the
television, and erupted a fantastic belch. The house was mine.

So when my father’s footsteps dragged down the hall carpet, I startled. “Just because
you’re staying home from church,” he said, “doesn’t mean you get to watch TV all day.” He
handed me a note card with a list of chores in his unsteady handwriting. Even when he took care
with print, it looked like the futile attempt of a madman to appear sane, the straight lines worried
with flinches. I scanned the list—picking up my room, vacuuming, doing and showing my
homework (even though I would’ve done it already and checked it myself). I asked my father
what he was doing.

“Writing a grant proposal. Want to trade?” Without waiting for an answer, he walked
back toward his office, his socked feet dragging static all the way. He tapped his hand against the
light switch at the end of the hallway to discharge the electricity.

My room was a mess, the floor a topographic map of the world with land masses of dirty
clothes, and I didn’t want to clean it. After all, I liked the day of rest. I thought of Adam’s
perpetually neat room. I’d been thinking of the things I wished I’d said to him, the explicit ways I wanted to challenge his sense of self and his refusal to tell me what happened to him the night the police came. The perfect walk-away lines, so common in movies. I’d reimagined scenes of our life so vividly I desired to retell them to someone.

So I walked into my father’s office, where he focused on the green letters on the black screen of his Commodore 64, his back to me. His computer rested on a bookcase built into the wall; he didn’t want it cluttering his desk.

“Hey Dad,” I said in my best still-a-boy voice, “can I talk to you about Adam?”

He swiveled in his chair, feet off the ground, and stopped himself by placing his palms flat on his desk. I wasn’t sure if the mention of Adam piqued his interest or if he simply wanted to avoid his drudgery. “Please,” he said.

He listened. I told him that Adam had a God complex, that he wanted to be a leader and had built a little following at school. That he treated me like his underling. That he and Eric and Shannon had teased me harshly Friday night, that he let Eric chase me around the park, that he refused to apologize. “I told him he wasn’t being my friend anymore, and he said he didn’t want to be my friend anymore.”

My father was red. As I spoke, he ran his hand back and forth through the thin hair of his crown. “I’m so sorry,” he said when I finished, and I had a moment of emotional vertigo as I was closer to my father than to Adam. Though I’d shaped my father’s sympathy for me on a hybrid of truth and lies, I could, at that moment, have told him any secret about myself. I had needed to lie because there were things I didn’t know how to say about myself, that I didn’t understand about myself, that had I tried to say I would have faced the border between language and what is true about myself and would have been unable to know how to cross it.
My father walked around my desk and hugged me, then tacitly absolved me of my day’s duties. “I’m going to talk to June about this,” he said.

I begged him, the anxiety in my voice real, not to. If Adam didn’t want to be my friend, I didn’t want to be his. It was between me and him, not my father and Mrs. Ellison.

So my father said he would not talk to her about it, and, for all I know, he never did.

Over that summer, I intermittently saw Adam wandering into the woods, or heading off in the car with his mother, or forming a silhouette against the drawn blinds in his window. Living next door, as much as I avoided interacting with him, I couldn’t avoid seeing him. When we accidentally got their mail, my father took it next door, not me. I spent the days indoors, falling into the worlds of television and books. My mother took a part-time job in the local library, and to get out of the house I rode with her to work and read during her four-hour shifts. Because I was fifteen and thought I knew my future, I turned to Literature. I would be learned, except for the hours I devoted at home to Bugs Bunny (allowed because my father was a fan) and Days of Our Lives (my mother’s little secret).

When I did venture outside on my own, I was doubly vulnerable—without a friend and assaulted by the heat. I sweated, my voice squeaked, my brain cycled to witty comebacks to playground taunts two minutes too late. Ad infinitum, ad nauseam. When I got caught gazing at huge bikinied breasts at the swimming pool, I knew the time inside served me better.

And Adam did—Adam did what? That summer and through high school, Adam appeared only in glimpses, occupying or occupied by a shadow world. What he did, no one seems to know. That fall, rather than walking together to the bus stop, we arrived separately. I’d read from doorstep to corner, where he’d be squatting, not sitting, with his deflated backpack over one
shoulder. We rarely spoke those chilly mornings, and nothing more than bare greetings. I pretended to read, glancing from sentence to him to street, waiting to nestle myself into a corner where I would disappear into my novel. Some mornings, he wouldn’t be at the bus stop, but I’d see him in the hallway at school. Other days, he’d ride in the morning, but I wouldn’t see him the rest of the day or on the bus home. We had no classes together, and inasmuch as I had a “crowd,” it wasn’t his. People hung out with him—outsiders of all stripes, from band nerds to groupless nerds to punks to the ugly—but he seemed to sometimes merge with them, then vanish.

Strangely, popular girls, pretty girls, liked him a lot. He’d pass one down a hall, and she’d reach a hand out and touch his arm, her voice up a half-octave, and he’d let slip that beatific smile, quick as a pickpocket, and walk on. I saw that enough to be jealous. Sure, I had girlfriends, but no one ever bestowed on me that glimmer of desire I saw in the faces of girls when he walked past. I noticed, but if he did, that acknowledgment didn’t cross his face.

But other, popular guys noticed, and they were jealous, too, puffing their puffery day after day for these girls and scoring intermittently, only to see those same girls entranced by someone else who made no effort at all. And that, if nothing else, was and is Adam’s genius: he’s an endearing enigma. Who knows what they’d heard him say in classes, in those brief hallway conversations? Enough to let him steal his way into their fugitive thoughts.

Once, the jealousy of those guys boiled over into action. At the end of our junior year, there was a huge party in our town, so large that both Adam and I were invited, me through the girl I was dating and Adam through God knows who. I was dating Katie Meriner, who would be valedictorian of our class, and who had been gawky in the tenth grade, who had become cute by the time I dated her, and who had in her senior year a confidence that made her beautiful. (We were no longer dating by then.) She drove me to the party in her father’s Crown Vic, with which
she nudged curbs and lurched into acceleration. Watching her drive was like watching a little girl trying to dance with a dog standing on its hind legs. Kissing her the few times I did was equally awkward at first, on both sides, but once we continued in earnest, the pleasure erased any unease.

The party was at the end of a cul-de-sac in a newer neighborhood built around a golf course. There were no sidewalks; lawns extended far before the homes and far in back past the patios and swimming pools. The driveways curved to the garages; the mailboxes had brick homes of their own by the street. Katie and I held hands as we walked past the daunting houses—one could call these estates, as the sign welcoming us to the neighborhood did. The host’s parents were out of town. Christmas lights draped around the front yard, over the pool in back. Three kegs stood in blue tubs; tiki torches lined the front walk.

We split once we each got our plastic cups of too-foamy beer I’d inexpertly poured. She went to her friends, and I spotted Adam on one corner of the back porch. Seeing him in this bizarre new context, a crowded party, made me want to talk to him.

“Hey,” he said, “Long time, no see.”

“Yeah, bizarre.”

That was our rapprochement.

“So you’re dating Katie Meriner?”

“Yep,” I said, my face, I’m sure, full of muted pride.

“Congrats,” he said. “She’s really nice.”

I asked who he was there with. He told me he came with some friends and nodded vaguely toward the pool, where tufts of people stood with cups in hand. “But I’m not seeing anyone right now,” he said, “if that’s what you’re asking.”
I’d heard rumors of people he may or may not have been dating at any given time, though almost always his name was peripherally attached. Sara made out with some guy, I think it was that loner Adam, or skinny Dave, along those lines. And I’d seen him stalking the halls at school—this is not a judgment on him, we all stalked those halls, dimly fluoresced as they were—with various girls as I’d seen him walk with various guys. But it seemed at several points that he walked singly with one girl for a few weeks at a time, only never to be seen with her again. Maybe I wanted so badly to know what went on in his life that every time I saw him I drew such conclusions.

“So what’s been up with you?” I asked, a sad, inadequate way to bridge the two-plus years since we’d spoken.

“Nothing,” he said, and laughed. “And everything.” I could see in the way he leaned against the deck railing and gazed out over the backyard and pool that his mind was working over something grand—I hoped it was his answer to me. He sipped from his plastic cup of beer, a layer of foam around the rim. I gulped my last bit of beer, which was half a mouthful more than I expected and stayed hotly in my throat once I negotiated swallowing.

In this way, we passed into the awkward space of post–small talk. I had a momentary fear I’d never know him again. Though I was still angry with him, his absence in my life walked hand-in-hand with me daily. I had no best friend, no real confidant.

“So what’s new with you?” he finally asked over the noisy quiet. Pop songs—I remember Madonna and the Go-Gos mostly—piped through outdoor speakers flanking the deck.

I was saved from answering. Katie stepped out of the back door with Liz Merrill, the host. Katie came to my side, and Liz closed the square. Her hair was brown, hairsprayed out into a squall, and her makeup was heavy, glistening eye shadow the color of algae. Lipstick a
throbbing dark red echoed on the inside rim of her cup of beer. I can resee these details so clearly because she wore a sheer black top over a tight tank-top that squeezed a line into her breasts, a Rubicon I wanted to cross. Through the sheer top, I could glimpse an imprint where the tank-top creased her skin. I had a weakness for cleavage, or rather a weakness for betraying my appreciation of cleavage. Even with Katie twining her fingers around mine, I kept my eyes focused on Liz’s hair and face.

I was peripheral to Liz’s life and to Liz’s interest in Adam. “I’m glad you came,” she said to him and leaned against the railing, the flare of her skirt tickling a line across his thigh.

“Nice to see you outside school,” Katie said. And there it was: that glimmer for Adam in Katie’s eyes. Her fingers were not intimacy with me, but excitement for him. I took this as the okay to glance all I wished at Liz’s chest.

Conversation wended through topics I can’t remember; no one said anything of note. Other partygoers stepped in, said hello, stepped out, hugged Katie, hugged Liz, made unsurprising, mildly risqué flirty jokes. Several guys told Liz how good she looked and echoed that for Katie as an afterthought. I’d gone through another couple of beers, and a tipsy breeze blew in my blood. During a pause in conversation after we watched several guys cannonball loudly into the pool, I glanced back to Liz’s cleavage and leered. Thanks to the alcohol, my responses were slowed enough to keep me openly glancing at Liz’s cleavage beneath the black sheer, the red crease in her skin. Liz pulled on the straps of her tank-top; Katie cleared her throat and excused herself to go to the little girlfriend’s room. Liz followed her inside.

“Subtle,” I said aloud, chiding myself. Over a hedge two yards over, two cigarette ends smoldered in the dark. I sat on the deck railing and leaned against the house.
Adam was clear-eyed. He hadn’t gone back for another beer but stood there holding his empty cup. Even he was silenced.

“I’m a little drunk,” I said by way of apology.

“It happens,” Adam said, looking in the direction of the golf course in the distance.

I wanted to ask if it happened to him, “it” meaning that broad desire for another physical body, that animal craving stalking all the way to your scalp. But I was half-drunk and swimming in phrases that had stuck with me. “Do you have eyes of flesh?” I said.

He waved at someone by the pool. “I’ll be right back,” he said. He walked down the deck stairs and onto the concrete.

In a way, I saw it coming. Tipsy as I was, in my jealousy of Adam’s appeal, my mind pulled everything into sharp focus and noticed that the pool was empty, that the cannonballers had disappeared, that Adam walked alone, surrounded by no one, protected by no one. He strode by the pool, and the four cannonballers sprinted from the bushes toward him with full-throated battle cries, their arms linked—the inverse of Red Rover, the wall running toward the man—and tackled Adam as he turned to face them into the pool. On the far side, a group of guys raised their cups and yelled out. People all around laughed or tsked at the cruel baptism. The cannonballers emerged, cheered, gave each other high fives as the water around them hissed and calmed.

They were out of the pool, dripping and reaching for beers, when someone called out, “He’s not coming up.” His dark body, arms spread, floated at the surface. His shirt billowed, a swollen paunch at his back. We all watched, though if he wasn’t coming up it was the time for acting, not watching. Two of the cannonballers climbed down the steps in the pool; once they reached the bottom, Adam surfaced for air. There was a general relief, but what overrode it was
anger—not at the meanness of the prank, but at Adam for tearing the scene so quickly to terror, from party to funeral. “Nice dive, Louganis,” someone called.

The cannonballers stepped aside from Adam, who dripped onto the concrete. A couple of people tossed empty cups at him; they landed at his feet. He kicked them away and walked through taunts up the driveway and out of sight. I went through the house, glanced around for Katie and didn’t see her, and went out unnoticed through the front door as Liz ran out the back door with fat towels in each hand.

I caught up with Adam at the end of the block. “Leave me alone, Thomas,” he said without looking to see who it was.

“Slow down,” I said, my calves sore from hurrying. Though our town was sparsely populated—fewer than 7,000—it spread across several square miles. To get home, we had a five-mile walk ahead of us.

He stopped. His cheeks were wet, though from the pool or tears I couldn’t tell. He reeked of chlorine. “I want to be alone,” he said. “Forever.”

“Too bad.”

His head dropped as if he were a marionette whose string was let go. “Okay.” We crossed a street to get on one of the asphalt bike paths the city had laid. “I’m so lost,” he said.

“I know where we are.” The stars shone brightly; the town hadn’t yet put streetlights all over and muted the mystery of night.

“That’s not what I meant.” His voice fought with congestion; water probably still settled in his head.
“I know.” But I only knew what he wasn’t saying: like negative theology, where one tries to define God by what he/she/it isn’t. But, as with negative theology, the process of elimination failed to clarify anything. “What do you mean?”

He snapped his head back, and drops of water flew behind us; he wiped minor streams from his forehead. “All my life,” he said, “I’ve known the way. I know what I am, and I know how ridiculous it is to you.”

I blushed at that.

“But it’s too hard sometimes. My loneliness is different from everyone else’s, and a challenge like that—like those assholes, those motherfuckers.” He stopped and closed his eyes. Goosebumps rose on his arms and neck. “Watch,” he said. He pointed at a dark pine in the distance, and two birds leapt into flight. A nest fell soundlessly to the ground.

“How the fuck?”

He walked on, again at an angry pace. “I control so much. I can do anything—anything I want. But I can’t. I shouldn’t. And they get to do that to me.”

I had to jog a couple steps every few yards to keep up. We came to a clearing, where there was a small park with swings and a sandbox on our right and to our left a wood fence guarding houses in the distance. I asked him to slow and calm down.

“No.” His voiced echoed away. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Why couldn’t you go after those assholes back there?” I thought of Adam in the cafeteria, whipping himself and captivating the crowd.

“I’m all wet,” he said and laughed. “I’m all wet, I tells ya.” He slowed to a depressed meander, then wandered off the path and sat on his knees. His breath was heavy and erratic, like that of someone about to vomit but trying not to. “They don’t know what I am. I could have
destroyed their lives. I could have killed them.” He hunched further, his ass on his heels and his spine curved forward like a hooked index finger. “How long?” he said. “How long?”

“Can I get you something?” I asked, though where I’d get it I had no clue. We were already a mile away from Liz’s house.

He breathed more slowly, deeply, each time becoming less slumped, like a balloon inflated breath by breath. Then he threw his head back and screamed. In the quiet dark, without the noise of air conditioners or people or cars in the distance, his voice became the only sound, obliterating the possibility of anything else. I tried to shush him, but he couldn’t have heard me. Even I couldn’t hear me, but merely sensed the trill of air against my teeth and lips. After several seconds, he stopped screaming, fell onto all fours, and whimpered. That whimper barely registered.

I wanted to run, to put distance between us. My legs shook, and I leaned forward and put my hands on my knees. I wasn’t responsible for him. Why didn’t I go? Why didn’t I leave him to his madness? It was the bird trick, that silhouette of flight and falling. In the dark, he was barely recognizable as a human figure, but I was afraid of what he might do to me. I told myself that was stupid—what could he possibly do? how could he get away with it?—but stayed by his side nonetheless. I wonder how much that fear, unmentioned in the Gospels, played into the lives of the Apostles. The congregations of various self-anointed Christ figures—David Koresh, Jim Jones—lived in a mix of ecstasy and horror. The overhanging threat, and in some cases actual violence, kept their audiences rapt and nearby. But what about Matthew and Peter? Alongside their love of Christ must have walked a doubt, a fear that this man of miracles was nothing more than a trickster hiding some unleashed fury he might turn in their direction if they betrayed him. “You yourself will deny me three times,” must have in Peter’s amygdala. I keep thinking of that
dead fig tree, felled by Christ’s hunger. I didn’t want any curses put on me that I hadn’t put on myself.

He dug his fingers into the dirt and kneaded it, then burrowed his hands deeper. “I’m going to be buried in this stupid earth some day,” he said.

“Aren’t we all.”

“We aren’t all,” he said quietly, as if he weren’t responding to something I’d said. “We aren’t all.” Then he lurched forward and vomited. Only the one purge, then a couple of dry heaves.

Once he was done, I put a hand on his bicep. He let me help him up. “Come on,” I said. “You’re going to be okay.”

We walked again. When I knew he wouldn’t be sick anymore, I asked how much he’d had to drink.

“Just the one beer,” he said. “That wasn’t from drinking.”

We didn’t talk until we were in my front yard and I asked if he was okay.

“Sure,” he said. “I’m going to bed.” He jiggered his house key into the lock and disappeared inside.

I slept badly that night. My parents were in bed by the time I got in. The house was dark except for the porch light. I switched on the television for distraction and turned the volume so low I had to strain to hear. I watched sports highlights, and before long I thought of Adam and Liz and Katie. I didn’t know if what I’d seen in Liz’s behavior toward Adam indicated anything other than natural hosting skills and a good heart. And I worried about Katie. The week prior to the party, I’d that night as a crossroads for me and Katie, when our dating and physical lives would grow more serious. We would circulate around the party together, I had imagined, being
seen together as a couple, and we would drive into a cul-de-sac of half-built houses and make out in her father’s car and I would go under her shirt and she would unfasten our pants, and afterward we’d pull a blue wool blanket from her trunk (I had no idea if there was one in her father’s trunk, but it persisted in my fantasies anyway) and curl together and look at the stars and tell one another the kinds of things, whatever they might be, that make two people closer, more serious, more adult.

But I’d left her without a word, and there I sat in my mother’s yellow chair in the living room, picking the nap off the armrest and worrying what Katie might be doing at that party full of people. I was angry at her for the things she might be spiting me, even though she would have been fully justified. I imagined the retribution she’d exact on the phone, ending our relationship, saw my future as a series of failed relationships doomed by my mistakes, witnessed myself fat, alone, and unloved, watching sports highlights well after midnight.

I heard my parents’ bedroom door clear its throat open and shut. My mother wandered into the living room, bleary. She went through periods of troubled sleep. “Hey sweetie,” she said. “How was the party?” She held an empty glass.

“It was okay.”

She got water in the kitchen, came into the living room sipping from her glass, and reclined on the couch.

“You want your chair?”

“No,” she said, “I’m good.” The back of her hair was a bird’s nest of tangles. “What are we watching?”

“We,” I said, “are watching sports highlights.”

“Mm.”
“I can change it.”

“No, this is fine.” She held her glass of water in both hands on her stomach. She wore a long dark blue robe that zipped up from the floor to her neck, making her look like an understudy to a monk. She’d had that robe for as long as I can remember. A hole, small as a pea, frayed open on her left shoulder blade. That robe smelled like her, vaguely earthy and of a bouquet of mild flowers. Grocery-bought tulips, maybe. Mom, I miss you so much.

She asked again how the party was.

“You know, toga toga toga and all that.” I stood up. “Pretty exhausting, actually.” I set the remote control on the coffee table next to her. “It’s all yours. I’m headed bedward.”

I lay down and thought about Katie. Even though I wasn’t exactly crazy about her, I mourned our lost future. I dozed off, then woke up long enough to hear my mother go back to bed.

The next morning, my stomach ached with anxiety about the call to Katie I knew I needed to make. After breakfast, I went to Adam’s house. June answered the door, all perk and giggle to see me, but Adam wasn’t home. We chatted: how had the school year been, how were my folks doing, did I have fun at that party last night. “You want me to tell him you came by?”

I told her no thanks, I’d try again later, knowing she’d tell him anyway. When I walked back, my father said, without looking away from the newspaper, “A girl called for you.” Then he met my eyes and said, “Katie, I believe?”

I told them—my mother sat next to him at the table—that she was a friend from school. “Did she leave a number?” I asked, though I could’ve recited it easily.

My father said she didn’t. I claimed I might have it in my room, and away I went.
Those days, we had two telephones, neither cordless: one in my parents’ bedroom, one in the kitchen. We’d had the same two phones—one rotary—forever. I lay down on my bed and tried to ease my anxiety by breathing. No luck. I gave my parents time to finish reading the paper, then went to the kitchen. But they were still there, my mother reading a novel and my father flipping through a book of photographs. I only used the phone in their room when they weren’t home; being in their dimly lit bedroom gave conversations intimacy, which I didn’t want interrupted by their entrance.

So I grabbed the kitchen receiver and pulled it around the corner into the dining room, where I sat on the floor and ran my fingers through the nap of the carpet while it rang.

Katie answered. Though I knew it was she, I said, “Is Katie there?”

“Tom. Yes.”

“So you called?” I heard a chair scuff linoleum, the pour of coffee into a cup, the click of someone turning off the coffeemaker.

She launched into the story of how she’d searched for me through Liz’s house, checking all the rooms, then made a circuit around the pool and even onto the golf course, where people were playing badminton without a net on the eighth fairway. Then she went back through the house, passing the same people who saw her looking for me the first time and clearly felt sorry for her.

I was ready to utter “I’m sorry” out of my parents’ earshot, but she kept talking. She was so embarrassed, but the first person she asked about me said I’d gone out after Adam. She knew he and I weren’t close—she didn’t know the extent of our lost friendship—and yet I’d left to help him, to walk him home. She figured that out as she drove home and stayed up thinking. And she was ready to forgive me for that if she was right.
As Adam and I had walked quietly through the dark, I’d thought about Katie and decided I would be fine if she broke up with me for abandoning her. I’d rationalized and rationalized until I came to that conclusion. But now I had to work at the conversation, and I had to do so with my parents nearby. So I showed a little courage. “That’s what happened. I felt bad about leaving you without saying anything, but he was quite humiliated”—yes, I spoke that way, “quite” being one of my affectations then—“and needed my help. The whole walk home I thought about you.” I suspected my parents were listening.

She wanted to see me that night, to come over and watch a movie. She used the word cuddle, and uneasy as the idea of her meeting my parents made me, as curious as I was why she hadn’t mentioned my drunken ogling at Liz, I wanted the warmth of her body against mine.

After I hung up, I told my parents about her like a boy confessing to breaking a window. They teased me, and when she came over, they put on their best faces and retired early to their room. Katie and I sat next to each other on the floor, leaning against the couch. I put my hands under her shirt and onto her breasts, or more precisely onto her bra. She put her hand high on my thigh. I remember distinctly thinking I would lose my virginity with this girl; any thought of ending the relationship had dissipated.

I’d kept my hands rubbing her breasts for several minutes when I heard my father burst into a fit of coughing. I removed my hands from her shirt, and she put her hands in her lap. Moments later, my father walked past us to the kitchen, his fist up to his mouth and his eyes deliberately away from us. The movie continued. Then he passed back through. But the mood was ruined.

I don’t know precisely why, but a few weeks later, I broke up with Katie over the phone. The call lasted less than five minutes; I didn’t have to listen to her cry. I saw myself as cruel and
petty. Honestly, I couldn’t have said why I wanted to break up with her; what I said was that things didn’t seem right. The rest of the summer, I didn’t talk to Adam either, and he didn’t talk to me.
Note to Self

Last night, drunk on cheap merlot, I read what I’ve written so far. At times, it doesn’t seem to be about Adam so much as about me. I like to think I’m against self-obsession and egotism, but I know that isn’t precise. I’m against a particular kind of self-obsession at the same time I essentially embody another kind. My mood commands the world around me and constructs how I see it. Even buildings become reflections of me. So writing about Adam, in part because he disappears from my view at times, I project myself into his world, as he projects himself into the worlds of others.

But whoever reads this—if anyone ever reads this—should understand the weight with which Adam bore down on my life. My habits, my fears, my assumptions about God and faith and even my parents, he shaped all of these. *Ex Adamo.* (I’m not entirely sober yet this morning.) And when we ended our friendship, I moored myself to myself—morbid, quiet, studious, my mind spinning angrily like a catherine wheel.

Adam ends our friendship, I stop going to church and lose my connection with my mother, a severance we never repair, so when she dies, it is a double severance. Blessed art thou, you son of a bitch. (Apologies to June—the saying is not literal.) In the meantime, Adam and I separate, it becomes impossible to say with any confidence what he did during the interim, and I’m left holding the bag—witnesses don’t come forward to tell about Adam’s Lost Years, and Adam himself doesn’t have any interest in accounting for the truth.

Of course, that’s the obvious problem with Christ’s story, too. We telescope forward from childhood to adulthood in the Gospels with little exception. Really, though, so much of Christ’s story hinges on waiting. We waited for Christ’s first arrival and for him to come back.
The history of Christ is much more a history of waiting than a history of him. Biographies should be stories of anticipation, of expectation, of the pause between breaths. A life only means anything relative to the lives it alters. We should focus less on the person than the ripples outward.

I used to think communion was ridiculous. Even as a child I didn’t understand it, though in our vanilla Methodist tradition, consubstantiation and all once a month, grape juice and a stale cracker, I accepted it. But I’ve begun recently to be more sympathetic about it. If you’re waiting for something or someone that seems like it will never return, place on your tongue or palm or in front of your eyes the memory of that thing. Absorb it, and it will overtake you. Instead of letting your own foul mood darken everything around you, let the memory into your bloodstream, traveling along in blood vessels to circulate and recirculate the possibility that the memory will generate the return: that holding the promise of Christ in our bodies, we will bring him back.

Obviously, ritual isn’t sensible. But it’s no less so than the ire I have for Adam. Maybe I’m too hard on him. Maybe I should think less of my life as one of those ripples affected by his. And maybe I should assume that his effect on my life isn’t negative. And, of course, what of those who follow him, who listen, who are smart and critical and happy? What about Therese, one of those he got off heroin? What about Doug and Paul and Erin, who are articulate, thoughtful, and over the moon for Adam and his message? And what about Shannon, who appeared at Adam’s Last Event, thin, his hair close-cropped and his scalp paler than his face, nearly unrecognizable. I noticed him in the crowd not as Shannon, but as one of the odder-looking people of the several dozen loners who’d gathered over the course of an hour as Adam spoke. I imagined myself as security and eyed him. The Zen intensity of his gaze on Adam
unnerved me. Afterward, like about twenty others, he wanted to get close to Adam, to talk to him.

These people would die for Adam; others have. Unlike these people, some among the smartest and most rational I’ve ever met, I can think of no cause I’d give my life to. Sometimes that’s the greatest pull to faith for me—I want to know what I’m missing.
January 15: Graduation

Several weeks before graduation, June approached my parents with the idea that our families attend and celebrate with one another. Adam and I had been born together and grown up together, and it would be nice to see each other off into the future. My parents—principally my mother—agreed, so on the morning of the ceremony, while we waited for June and Adam, my parents and I took photos as I posed in my sweltering robe and mortarboard. I was salutatorian and nervous about the brief address I had to give before Katie delivered her valedictory speech. The peace sign I held up for photos was my ironic acknowledgment: I’m number two!

Commencement was to begin at one. By eleven, we’d heard nothing from the Ellisons, and my father, always impatient about being late, paced the house. I stretched my throat against the choke of my shirt and tie, and my mother read. Finally irritated enough by my father, she walked next door to check on June and Adam. When she came back minutes later, she stood in the front door and said, “We should go.”

My father shifted from time anxiety to information anxiety and refused to leave until my mother told all she knew. She quickly spilled: Adam had disappeared the night before. He’d left a note. My mother didn’t know what it said. June was a mess.

“Mom,” I said as my father was backing us down the driveway at 11:30—they were holding it far across the city in a largely unused arena—“if you want to stay here with Mrs. Ellison, I understand.”

My father put the car in park and idled. I didn’t really want her to stay, and I was surprised that my father seemed to be waiting to take me up on the idea. My mother turned in her seat—she was in the front, and with my long legs I sat behind her—and looked me in the face.
She gazed at me so long I had to look away. She faced forward and said to my father, “Let’s go. I’ll talk to her when we get back.”

At the arena, rumors came around of pranks people might try despite the stern warnings we’d received, of a pair of girls who claimed to be naked under their gowns, of various people who would walk but wouldn’t actually graduate because they’d failed a class and had to go to summer school. Katie and I were cordial by then, even friendly—though not friends—and chatted about college. She was off to Georgetown. She had developed into a stunningly beautiful girl by then, but I was distracted, trying to remember if I’d seen Adam at the walkthrough the day before.

Then we marched to cheers and air horns and the sophomores and juniors in band playing “Pomp and Circumstance.” I didn’t try to search my parents out; between the arena’s persistent odors—cigarettes and marijuana from concerts, animals and shit from farm shows—and the blurry mess of crowd and posters and cameras flashing, my senses couldn’t still themselves enough to order the space around me as we walked.

Once on stage and sitting, I saw my parents straight ahead, only a few rows from the top. They waved. My father may have winked. Our principal spoke of how each graduating class was unique and had greatness ahead, though he listed neither greatnesses from the past nor the particular uniqueness of our class. But the outside world, of which we were strangely aware, suggested a great wide-open future: Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan, Reagan (or, as my father called him, “fucking Reagan”) visiting the USSR, the plume of smoke that was the Challenger still aloft in our mind’s sky. We were all so distant from that, yet we seemed close to it, on the cusp of something amazing. And I kept wondering where Adam was and being nervy before my speech.
I said nothing of import. Like our principal, sadly, I was full of gauzy hope for the future.
I had four minutes to wax pseudo-poetic, my legs trembling and lines of sweat trailing down my back. A low rustle of conversations from the crowd reached me as I spoke. An air horn went off halfway through, and the crowd shushed, then went quiet, then returned to its murmur. People applauded politely when I sat. Katie put her hand on mine and told me my address was lovely. Did she know the power she had over me?

What she spoke of I don’t remember. Then the procession, with a few graduates leaving once they got their “diploma” (actual diplomas would be mailed weeks later), then the recessional, then the future.

I went to the huge graduation party that night, though I’d only been accidentally invited because, a week earlier, I stood in a circle that included actual invitees. I drove my father’s station wagon, or rather helmed it, as it steered like a boat. I stayed an hour, drifting from conversation to conversation. I ran into Katie by the front door. She said we should hang out during the summer. “Yes,” I said.

But we didn’t.

My mother didn’t learn why Adam had disappeared, but she spent every morning June had off from work drinking iced tea at the Ellison house. First Daniel left June, now Adam. There was no one left to leave her. But in all those mornings, my mother evidently couldn’t or wouldn’t steer the conversation to Adam. They small talked.

One Saturday, my mother had a too-full list of errands to run and asked me to go say hi to June. That summer I decided to be an obedient boy, the last favor I could offer my parents before
I moved out forever. So around eleven, I knocked on June’s door. I noticed how much she’d aged; I hadn’t taken a good look in so long. Tributary wrinkles spread from her eyes, and the skin around her jawline had slackened. She invited me in, warmly as usual, and whisked me past her mild lavender scent.

The house was neater than I remembered, though still dim, as if a scrim of dust filtered the light that came through the windows. I sat deep into the couch’s middle; she balanced on the edge of her chair, a dark wood with a latticed back and a flat blue seat that had once been a darker blue. It seemed like a long-abandoned museum of a house.

She asked how I was doing, was I still planning to major in history, what about that girl I was dating last summer. I learned she knew more about me than I’d expected. I assumed she’d heard it from my mother, except for the bit about the girl last summer—Katie. The disconnect was odd; she would’ve heard that from Adam, but surely he would’ve known the relationship was long over (though I suppose he wouldn’t necessarily have told her).

I asked June how she was doing and had little to follow up with. Except for aging, she, too, was frozen in time for me; if anything about her life had changed in the last few years, I didn’t know what it would be.

We’d been chatting for about fifteen minutes when the conversation stalled into awkward silence. I catalogued the changes to the living room and found only two: a newer television, and a framed, palm-sized photo of teenaged Adam on the coffee table. He looked to the side of the camera, toward me; the picture made me want to see what was behind me.

June perked: “Would you like a sandwich?”

She made me a grilled cheese. We sat across from one another at the circular table in her dining nook. My sneakers squeaked on the linoleum. She didn’t have her air conditioning on. A
stale breeze, nudged by the living-room ceiling fan, met us where we ate. The sandwich left my fingers slick even after I wiped them on my napkin.

June smiled. “My husband used to love grilled cheese sandwiches but hate the grease that came off. He wrapped his sandwich in the napkin so his fingers stayed dry.”

“I don’t mind,” I said with a mouthful. I’d never heard her say anything about Daniel Ellison before. Eager as I was to hear anything—in fact, I wanted to hear her say he was Adam’s father—I kept my mouth shut, the deference I usually kept around adults.

“We’d sit out on the back patio and eat, even if it was hot. It was lovely.” She ate the last bite of her sandwich, then sucked each of her fingertips. I noticed that, unlike pretty much every other time I’d seen her, she wasn’t wearing any jewelry, not even a ring.

“Mrs. Ellison, can I ask you a question?”

Up to that point, I’d never really ascribed to her any power or intensity; despite the time she’d slapped Adam, I’d always seen her as the sweet, gentle, meek mother next door. An infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing. But the look she gave in response to my question threatened me. It was as if she marshaled some force within that shaped her face into a mask of power. Her wrinkles and blemishes seemed stately, commanding. “Yes,” she said.

“Where’s Adam?”

She slackened. Not the question about Daniel I think she expected, and not the quaver in my voice, either. “Gone,” she said. “He’s left the nest, as they say.” She smiled, a brave face, and went to the antique bureau near the television. She came back with a sheet of unlined paper, folded and unfolded many times. It could’ve been any one of a thousand high-school notes that had gone through my hands. She gave it to me and sat back down.

In Adam’s blocky script, the lines declining toward the right side of the page:
Dear Mom,

I’m sorry to disappear this way, but I have to go away for a while. I need to spend a little time in the wilderness. You’ll hear from me soon. I’ll try and explain it then. I love you, Adam

After re-reading it several times, each time sensing I missed something, I said, “Where did he go?”

“That note is all he left me. Your guess,” she said, “is as good as mine. He has to do what he was made to do.”

“What was he made to do?”
She smiled. “If you make me say it, I’ll feel like a child.”

“Be the son of God?”
She nodded. “I know it sounds silly. But that’s what he is. It’s what he’s decided to be.”

I folded the note back up along its creases and reached it toward her.

“You keep it,” she said. “I’ve got it pretty well memorized.”

I slid it into my pocket like found cash. I took my plate and hers into the kitchen and slid them into the dishwasher. From the kitchen, I faced her back. She’d gained weight. In that tableau, she looked so lonely; I didn’t want to be yet another person to abandon her.

“Is there anything you need done around here?” I asked. “Anything I can help with?”

So I spent the day helping around the house with a vigor I’d never brought to chores: moving a dresser in her bedroom, helping her throw out stacks of newspapers, mowing her lawn and watering her garden. At the end of the day, she asked if I wanted to stay for dinner. I did. I ran next door to tell my parents and placed Adam’s note into the shoebox of my treasures. After
we ate, we played cards—gin rummy, go fish. She was a card shark, quietly bitter at losing, quietly boastful at winning.

I asked if she and Adam played much. She shook her head. “Not so much the past few years. He’s been a bit into his own thing,” she said, gazing into her hand curled toward her like a fan.

After several drawn-out games—I won only twice—she stretched and said she should head to bed. Getting up from the floor required several stages, from turning to her hands and knees, to getting one foot on the floor, then the other, then bringing her hands off once she had balance. I slid the cards into a neat deck and stood.

“I guess I should head home.”

She offered a tired smile. “Thanks for the day,” she said. She put a hand on my shoulder and walked past to the kitchen.

A room away, I said, “Can I stay the night in Adam’s room?”

I could hear the glimmer in her voice as she spoke from the kitchen: “There are clean sheets on his bed. I’ll put some fresh towels in the bathroom.”

I didn’t bother telling my parents I’d be staying the night. Frankly, I didn’t want to see their reaction. June went to bed, and I went to Adam’s room. It was essentially the same as always—bed tucked into the corner topped with a patched quilt; squat dresser beside it with a wood-paneled alarm clock, the fat family Bible, and a three-photo frame with pictures of himself with his mother, his mother graduating high school, and his aunt Sharon on a beach. His underwear, socks, and T-shirts packed the dresser; in the closet his clothes hung neatly above his shoes. He’d evidently left with little or nothing. Beneath his bed were his magic kits, the cardboard lids loose and the pieces shoved haphazardly in the boxes.
His desk, the one Daniel Ellison made, was the real prize. I saved it for last. A row of books sat across the back—C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, only the first three volumes with creased spines; a smattering of Tolkien; a copy of *Othello* I’d bought him at a junior-high library bookfair; a ’50s hardcover history of the world with heavy pencil underlinings that pressed through the pages; and a pocket-sized notebook. The cover of this last was creased and worn on the corners, but I flipped it open to find the pages blank and the coil a nest of torn page edges.

I lifted the lid of the desk. Inside was litter: graded homework and tests, handouts and assignments. Some dated back to ninth grade. I flipped through the unsorted mess, looking for anything of note, but found nothing but the accumulation of information. I poured them onto the floor, giving myself a paper cut in the process, so I could sort them. But how? By year? By subject? By handwriting? I needed to make a kind of sense of the past few years of Adam’s life. I set aside the handouts and assignments and stacked his work by letter grade, from the highest A to the lowest D, a 61. He knew chemistry; he forgot, then later learned, history. He hadn’t read closely for English.

Having learned nothing, I stacked his papers inside his desk. I thought about scattering those polite rectangles I’d made, but I decided that if Adam came back, I wanted him to know what I’d gone looking for.

I turned out the lights and got into bed. I remembered from sleepovers how Adam slept on his back, one knee bent and his arms around the pillow, his head cocked to one side and mouth open. I worked myself into that position, hoping I might glean something from being as Adam, even in this small way. It took me a while to fall asleep, and my dreams were unmemorable. But the rest of the summer I spent at June’s house doing tasks, running errands,
playing the role of a son before going home for dinner. I saw myself as a replacement for the nullity of Adam.

The night before my parents and I were to begin our drive to college on the east coast, I was in my bedroom masturbating. I was oddly sad and anxious that I wouldn’t have my room to masturbate in anymore. My parents were predictable, my times of privacy essential and known. But at college, I’d have a roommate and friends in my hall, the footsteps and echoes in the dorm hallway, the noises in the next dorm making me paranoid about the noises I might be making. So I was sending myself off in style, so to speak.

My walls were empty of posters, my closet only a quarter full with clothes. My parents had gone to bed, and my room was dark but for the closet light I’d turned on. I balanced on my knees and one hand, working myself drily and quietly atop the sore springs of my mattress. I hadn’t been there long when my room shone with light. It took me a moment to realize the light came from June Ellison’s back porch—I wasn’t caught. I dressed and looked down from my window. There, like a vision, was Adam. The light shone on his back, and his face was cast in darkness. He glanced up—I couldn’t tell if he was looking at the night sky beyond our roof or at my face in the window. I watched, waiting for his image to dissipate into the bugs swirling around the porch light.

I tread lightly down the stairs, slid on my sandals, and went out our back door, catching the screen before it clacked into its frame. The air outside was warmer, more humid, than the air inside our house. My skin seemed covered instantly in film. I walked around my mother’s vegetable garden, which extended several yards from the back of the house, and into Adam’s sight line and the light from his porch.
“Adam,” I called quietly and waved.

His face, still cast in shadow, burst into a smile. “Tommy,” he said.

“Tom,” I corrected. We were within arm’s reach now. I’d hugged so many people in the past weeks—graduation, last summer parties, the final time I’d see someone—that my initial physical impulse was to hug him, even as my anger at him over his absence, my anger on June’s behalf, pulsed its rhythm. We shook hands; his long, bony thumb hooked hard onto mine.

“Where have you been?” I asked. I meant to say how have you been.

He was thin, almost without muscle or sinew. His hair roped down past his ears, and he had an unkempt beard, spotty on his cheeks. By then I was shaving twice a week, hyper aware of any growth, my hand to my face frequently to check for stubble. His hand was like a bird’s claw; his T-shirt hung down as if in its own exhaustion. “Forty days and forty nights,” he said. “The wilderness. I hitchhiked to New York City, spent a few weeks living on the street, and hitchhiked back.” He smiled broadly, clearly proud of himself. “I came to know the world,” he said.

“You led yourself into temptation?”

“I came to know temptation,” he said. He held out his bicep and showed me a yellowed bruise, big and rare as a silver dollar. “I got into a fight. I never knew what a pleasure it was to punch or to be punched.”

“You punched someone?”

“I did,” he said, and held up his fist as some sort of evidence. “In the chest.”

“It basically killed your mother when you left,” I said. All my life, I’ve been prone to unnecessary overstatement in arguments.

“I know,” he said. “That was the first temptation.”

“That was the first temptation? To break your mother’s heart?”
“‘Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’ Of course, it’s not exact to say that was the first temptation, as we live a life full of them, but once I decided I needed to leave for the wilderness—”

“For New York City.”

“Yes, for New York City. That was the first temptation, to hurt my mother. And I learned that not all temptations come from what we call Satan. Some come from God, and some are born of the wind, of our very breath.”

My head hurt. I had come outside out of some odd goal of sticking it to him for how he’d upset June, how I’d had to be son to two mothers in his absence, but I’d met this burgeoning prophet full of bad metaphors and enigmatic abstractions. Even his beard was half-baked. But then he caught my attention.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“What for?”

He looked me straight in the eyes. And then his eyes ticked incrementally around my face. “For a lot, honestly. But right now I’m thinking of our friendship. I should have been the one to save it.”

Though I agreed, I resented him for again placing himself above me. In his eyes, he was the capable one. And yet, I could see a genuine sorrow in his face. We are lucky to be able to look back at times in our lives and say, “Yes, there I did something mature, I became a better person, even if for a moment,” and seeing the sorrow on his face and deciding not to rebuke him for his arrogance I count as one of those moments. I could have cursed him, but I didn’t. Instead, I said, “Thank you. I’m sorry, too. I probably could have done more.”
We stood awkwardly, face-to-face but avoiding looking at one another. Why are the moments of sincerity in our lives so often full of stuttering awkwardness and difficulty?

“I want to tell you everything about my time in the wilderness,” I said.

Mosquitoes had discovered my sweat and flurried onto me. I began a dance of swiping them away. “I leave for school in the morning.”

“Then you’re not going to get much sleep,” he said, and smiled.
Chapter and Verse: The Gospel of the Wilderness

Ten—

_The lost apostle recorded the following after Adam's return from the wilderness._

“I took nothing, and I lacked for nothing. I had the clothes I wore and my body. I carried no money, no identification, no souvenirs or memorabilia of my first eighteen years other than my flesh and the scarring of my flesh; I carried nothing but my clothes, my memories, my language, and my God.

“I hitchhiked. Not along the freeways at first but along state routes that sped through fields and slowed through towns. I rode and slept and spoke in the cars of kind people, lonely people, curious people. When they offered the charity of their homes, I thought to decline because I needed no charity, but I realized that to accept charity is sometimes a charity in itself. And when people offered charity behind the reluctance of their hearts, I declined and slept under the stars.

Eleven—

“Eventually I hitchhiked on freeways and rode in trucks, in minivans, in station wagons. When people asked, I told them my mission in clouded terms—to experience the wilderness of the city, to help who I could, to change the lives of those who needed their lives saved. But I understood my telling was a deception because I did not tell them the origin of my mission. And they asked, incredulously, ‘Why do you want to do this?’ They filled their cars with music, with gasoline, with suitcases and medicines and clothes and coins, and with their charity for me.
“So I told them the truth when they asked, that I am the second son of God. Some laughed; some shuddered; some quizzed me. ‘How do you know?’ one skeptic asked. ‘How could I not know?’ I said. And I wondered: is my lineage a vanity? Is it a sin to declare I am the second son of God, and does that sin diminish my mission and the offices of my faith because it spurs them to doubt?

“Because all of them doubted. They all asked for proof, and I offered none other than faith. I did so as a test, a test to measure how much anyone could put faith in me, a test of my humility. They, and I, failed that test. And when they denied me, when they came either openly or silently to their conclusion, I felt two things. One was a pride that I knew and that they did not know, the pride of knowledge that the serpent snuck into the Garden and slipped into the bodies of humankind. The other I felt was sadness that I did not inspire faith with my mere presence and claims.

Twelve—

“In that way, I led myself into temptation. I saw my pride and sadness, and knew them as vanity. And the sorrow at that was another vanity, so I thanked those who had helped me for their charity and travelled on alone.

“And I wondered then and wonder still: is the legacy of my paternity a trial? Does God my father ask me to test myself against that vanity? Should I seek to live by my mission alone? Or does the richer fruit of God’s lineage offer the spiritual nourishment some seek as they join the mission and offer up their bodies and souls?

“Still I don’t know.
“For God does not offer, even to me, the simple advice or wisdom to understand the perils of human vanity. For God’s truth, God’s ‘law,’ as our language would have it, does not know the pleasure and suffering of vanity; we must seek the way, even me. Thus does humility pour itself into vanity’s cup, and thus do we taste to discern.

Thirteen—

“I did save one soul before I reached the wilderness of the city. A man picked me up from the road. When he asked me, ‘Who are you,’ I replied, ‘I am the second son of God,’ and he desired to tell me his confession. He told me all his sins, including murder.

“He told me of his marriage, of his spiritual infidelity to his wife and her subsequent physical infidelity to him and her admission of that adultery. He told me how he failed to love his children enough, how he lied to his wife and claimed to forgive her but did not really do so in his heart; how he tormented her and imagined the ways she had already and might again torment him; how, finally, he took his children to his wife’s mother’s house, returned home alone, and shot his wife. She writhed, and he shot her again eventually.

“And after he told me how she writhed in the bed sheets that she had bought and the shirt he had bought for her, he reached before me to the glove compartment, removed the gun with which he shot his wife, and said, ‘And now it’s time for me to writhe and die.’

“And as he held the gun in his lap with one hand and kept the steering wheel steady with the other, poised to act, I asked him, ‘Do you wish to die to end your suffering, or do you wish to bring a real end to your suffering?’ He asked what I meant. And I told him, ‘If you wish to die to end your suffering, then your suffering will not end, but will spread and multiply as surely as the bullet would send forth your blood and brain from your body. Your suffering would scatter along
the wind and settle into the earth and grow and metastasize and bloom its rotten blooms and drop
more seeds into the earth of humankind. Your suffering will send forth a pollen of sorrow to
capture and torture your family, your friends, even those you don’t know. And that flower of
sorrow will push others out of the ground so they will suffer your sorrow, too.’

‘Then I said to him, ‘Worst of all, that sorrow will rebound onto you in ways you cannot
understand.’ And he said, ‘I don’t believe in hell.’ And I replied, ‘Call it what you like and
choose not to believe it if you must, for that sorrow, too, will echo upon your soul and those of
others.’

‘He asked, ‘Is that God’s law?’ And I told him God has no law, only humankind. And I
laid my hands on his hands, my pulse on his pulse, and watched his tears. He understood. He
removed the bullets from the gun and threw them onto the road, then replaced the gun in the
glove compartment. ‘I understand,’ he said, and turned his body over to the law.

Fourteen—

“My last hitch deposited me in Queens. It was late afternoon, and for most of the drive
I’d fasted and prayed, fasted and prayed. I asked for water and was granted it. My thirst
quenched, I walked the streets, taking in the sensations orphaned by others on the street with me:
eroded brick façades, block letters on signs, the smell of bodies and waste blurred along the
winds that moved through the columns and rows of buildings.

“Most of my days in the wilderness of the city, I tasted rust on the air. Sometimes I sat
and watched, awaiting the temptations of God and man; other times I walked in search of them,
seeing the people give into them, large and small. I succumbed to the gravitation of Manhattan
and Times Square, that area the crux of so much desire and need. Cool nights, I stood on subway
grates with society’s castaways and offered them what scraps of hope and faith I could. They drank, they used what drugs they could briefly afford, they stayed warm in what stolen or given clothes they could. I soon began to physically resemble them, etched with sun and dirt and stubble. When I sat to ponder and observe, strangers dropped money at my lap and sometimes offered food. Most of that I passed forward to those who needed it more.

“Volumes of cruelty could be documented daily. People shoved one another as if they meant nothing. Boys younger than me spat in the faces of strangers and laughed. Men older than our parents thieved purses and wallets and ran. Women and men taunted one another with spite, eyed and ogled and leered. Men clothed in suits costlier than our lives cursed and ignored the dignity of men and God with their brazen acquisitiveness as they climbed into monstrous divides of steel and glass and marble, where they treated the great wealth of the very few like giant toys for their fondling and lust.

“Worst of all, this multitude of sin and vanity was as mundane as the daily movement of dust made visible by sunlight. It was as if the great mass of humankind had accepted the purgatory of flesh and the rightness of their venality. Those of us who spoke the judgments of God faced scorn, mockery, laughter, or we were ignored altogether. Every breath a further failure of mankind, every blink a vast blindness to the gift of sentience. How long? How long?

Fifteen—

“I worked. Some days I labored for the wages of man, plucked from a group who stood at dawn begging for work. I performed as a gardener, a builder, a mover. The skin of my hands grew calluses, hard shells they’d never known. I felt the pleasure of pressing a blister, the temptation of idleness, the desire to outperform my fellow men, the petty envy consummated by
the couplings of wealth and otherness. Few seemed blessed because they ignored the blessings around them. I embodied and explored the temptations put forward by God and man, then cast aside each, just as the mass of man cast aside virtue and love and each other.

“Other days I labored for the Lord. There were no wages other than those of sin and virtue. God asked me to understand the realm of temptation, so he sent me temptations, just as he sent trials to Job and temptations to Christ.

Sixteen—

“‘Know the temptation of greed,’ God said, so I went to Wall Street, the temple of markets and I entered the hollowed halls of that land, with its idols of the past and paans to itself in the forms of wealth and mythic Babel towers. Inside, among the chatter of sales and deals, the false catechisms and self-gilding mantras, the furniture as stuffed and empty as the suits that spoke the language of wealth, security accosted me. Filthy as I was, I trespassed upon their image of riches.

“But as the security tried to cleanse that place of me, one of the suited men, his very self wafted and masked in the sick odor of heavy perfumes, came over and said, ‘Wait. This man is here to see me.’

“So the security agents, inhabiting but not endowed with the fullness of that place of wealth, unhanded me. The suited man led me into an elevator and took us up three dozen floors. He led me to a conference room with a golden trash can and a polished oak table.

“The man said to me, ‘You can see things, can’t you? I can tell by your eyes.’ He put a list of commodities and stocks before me and said, ‘Tell me which will perform well over the next hour and which will perform badly.’ I did so out of curiosity. I had a foreknowledge—the
letters of success glowed as if lit by lamps from within—and I made my choices. He phoned and dictated to someone to buy shares of those I’d said would do well and to keep a watchful eye on those I’d said would fall.

Seventeen—

“He asked me to speak about myself, so I spoke of God, of my mission, of my birth. He replied with a script of meaningless hymns to a God that his soul did not truly worship. Just as those letters glowed, his soul did not. I could tell that the words he spoke he had spoken many times and always with so little ensoulment, just as I had spoken my own words in similar words multiply, but each time anew as if God forged those words in the stove of my throat.

“After an hour’s time, the phone rang, and he wrote down what his communicator told him. He hung up the phone and shook his head. ‘It never ceases to amaze me,’ he said. ‘You’re incredible.’ He offered me money in exchange for more predictions; he offered me what he called ‘a lifestyle of comfort that would correspond with my values.’

“Before I answered, he asked me how I thought those stocks and commodities would perform in the long term. I asked what he meant by ‘the long term.’ ‘For in the longest term, even the mustard seed and its branches of birds returns to ashes and dust, just as this island of towers will become rubble and be digested by the sea.’

“Though startled, he said, ‘I meant in one year, or five years.’ He waited for an answer, so I asked, ‘Do you want to understand?’ and he said, ‘I want to know.’ So I told him those are not the same, and I left.

“As I rode down in the elevator, God told me thus, as I translate roughly for you: ‘Though you came to know the greed of men and money, you failed to see your own greed, the
vanity you held of your knowledge, the wealth and value of your self. For greed comes not only in the commerce of coins and gold, but also when one sees a commerce of souls. You held your soul above his; you set it in a scale as sellers of old weighed their wares against stones, and you felt a profit, a richness of self that is not wealth, but greed. And that is an utter poverty.’

“So God punished me with a vision of suffering: as the elevator descended, I saw the words I had spoken to the suited man become real, as angels hovered above the island of towers and those towers dissolved from steel into dust and fell like giant, grainy tears to the streets, and rivers of dust and ash filled the grid of streets, and the voices of mourning below rose until the roar of ash choked those throats and the ash and dust became water that flowed into the seas, and the angels above played dirges upon their invisible instruments for this world of sorrow and sin.

Eighteen—

“So God punished me with a vision of suffering: as the elevator descended, I saw the words I had spoken to the suited man become real, as angels hovered above the island of towers and those towers dissolved from steel into dust and fell like giant, grainy tears to the streets, and rivers of dust and ash filled the grid of streets, and the voices of mourning below rose until the roar of ash choked those throats and the ash and dust became water that flowed into the seas, and the angels above played dirges upon their invisible instruments for this world of sorrow and sin.

Eighteen—

“By the time the elevator doors opened on the bottom floor to release me and the suited businessmen who rode with me, I was weeping, a flesh of tears, and the security men grabbed my arms and dragged my sobbing body to the street, where unsuspecting souls wondered at my tears. The security men slung me forward, and God said, ‘Know that temptation.’ So I turned and swung my fist at the man, the human surge of violence animating me. ‘You will hear me,’ I yelled. Thus I knew the temptation of hurt and was taken to jail, where I met many who needed ministering and offered the wisdom that I could.”
January 16: Undeclared

The further I get from college, the more ambivalent I am about it. For all the talk of the ivory tower and how distant its pretensions are from the “real” world—how true it is of many academics, of course, which misses the point—within a two-hundred yard walk I could experience the student center with its mounds of chatter and prefab food, the chem lab’s sterile odors and distilled quiet, the row of dilapidated fraternity houses (originally Victorians), the block of black churches and tiny liquor stores with bars on the windows and ’70s paint jobs. And only a couple of blocks past that, Koreatown, then the city’s dead industrial row with streets marked by litter and broken glass and graffiti so old it had begun fading from the sun. And on the horizon beyond that, the new development, bordered on its farthest side from campus the city’s old wealth and the kinds of churches my father called “Six Flags Over Jesus.”

College itself, so much a blur. Professor Dornan obsessed with Achilles’ shield. Achilles’ heel; the heel of that redhead in sociology, which I imagined stroking in her imagined bed. Troubled sleep in my unquiet bed in the unquiet dorm, where I had to shave three times a week. Occam’s razor; Johnson kicking Berkeley. The guy in a fetal position getting kicked behind my dorm one night as I stumbled back drunk. The quadratic equation; girls on the quad once sunlight broke through early spring. The formula for a spring. Formulate an original idea; revise, revise, revise. Review, review, review. Take in the view: the campus descends, and when the Bradford pears bloom in spring, the putrid odor descends. Walls of fliers in hallways, tabs with phone numbers, films showing, meetings of the such-and-such society, come see a free all-ages show. Have you accepted Christ into your life? Christ is Victor, thus Victor Christ. What’s your major? Malfunction. Not math, not anymore. Nirvana. I am Hiroshima, destroyer of worlds. Then
Nirvana, smells like teen spirit, loving it until I hated it. Give me credit hours, or give me death.
Yes, professor.

My roommate freshman year was Leonard Abbey, proof that the compatibility forms I filled out were a hoax. He had a thick, sunburned body; you could see pink scalp through his crew cut. He insisted I call him Leo; his friends called him Nard.

From the first week his textbooks, papers, clothes, cassettes, and damp towels overran the invisible border that halved the room. He was loud and, often skipping class, he spent a lot of time in the dorm. He had a manic joy that always seemed ready to break through into rage, and twice in the first few weeks, when I got a little pushy about his mess, he wrestled me into arm locks, and, in his voice asking me to concede, I heard a desire to fight.

So I knew the library well, with its jumble of half-floors—the work of three different architects over thirty-five years—and its concrete shell, dressed in front with Doric columns and ringed at the top with Latin phrases regarding wisdom and truth. When I made it back to the dorm around midnight, Leonard would be standing outside our doorway, throwing and receiving a Nerf football or engaging in some elaborate alternative use for the wooden chairs that came with our spartan rooms. “Yo, Nard,” someone would yell when I emerged from the stairwell, “it’s the Nerd.” We were Nard and the Nerd, an eminently separable pair.

About halfway through the semester, Adam called: he was going to be in the city for a couple of nights, and he needed a place to stay. I told him all I could offer was my floor, but he countered that my floor would be better than he was used to.

The night before I left for college, Adam reappeared at June’s house and kept me up all night with a rambling, alternately self-loving and self-loathing story about his exploits
hitchhiking and living on the street in New York City. I would later verify his claims to some extent—a man who’d killed his wife had indeed turned himself in, but there was no mention of his spiritual guide. A human interest featured a Wall Street trader who openly looks to psychics and mystics for stock advice that proved somewhat better than index averages, but the article mentioned a couple of kooks and frauds—none of them Adam.

I slept most of the drive, but I remember at one point my mother asking if I’d seen Adam the day before. I gave her a brief précis of Adam rambling through the night—I couldn’t bear to mention his claims of temptation and saving a few souls and seeing visions—and closed by saying, “I don’t know whatever happened to that kid.” A weirdly urgent silence followed. I didn’t know on what authority I’d called Adam, my elder by a pinch of hourglass sands, a kid; I knew I was presuming some adulthood I hadn’t earned and so was even more childish, like a toddler who demands a big-boy bed but fears the loss of the crib’s protective bars.

I hadn’t told Leonard that Adam was coming, much less asked if he could sleep on our floor. The night before Adam was to arrive, I finished my homework early and headed back from the library to tell Leonard. When I stepped in from the chill to the dorm’s blessedly overheated lobby, Leonard was on the payphone, huddled into the booth’s barrier and the knotty pine wallboard. He spoke quietly. I clapped his shoulder twice—we’d developed a series of friendlyish greetings—and nodded at him.

I waited in our room, where the hallway had an odd quiet, so that any loud voice sounded out of place, a violation rather than the norm. I neatened my side and slid Leonard’s things to his with my foot. Then I lay back in bed, too nervous and brain-tired to read, and repeatedly tossed a tennis ball to the ceiling and caught it.
The door swung open. Leonard tried to slam it behind him, but the hydraulic closer slowed it. When the latch clicked, he shoved the door again, pushing himself away, then slapped it several times as if trying to get the attention of someone on the other side. “Fucking fuck,” he said. He was crying.

I said his name; he started and wiped his eyes. “Tom, when did you get here?” His face was even redder than normal, as if he’d been standing over a hot stove.

“I waved to you when I came in. You were on the phone.”

He sat on his bed and sobbed. He didn’t even cover his face. I knew the double shame of being unable to cover up one’s original embarrassment. I asked what was wrong—probably the most direct question I’d ever asked about his emotional state—and he said, “My parents are getting a fucking divorce.”

“But I thought you were expecting this.” He’d begun snide comments several times, “When my parents finally get divorced,” with palpable bitterness. Once when bouncing a superball back and forth down the hall, he and a friend debated the merits of which parent he should side with.

“I didn’t think they’d really go through with it. And it’s the way it happened.” He paced, nearly futile in our small space. “My mom cheated on my fucking dad. She fucked around on him. He was trying again not to cry. “My dad called to tell me, and he bawled like a little girl, blubbering and shit. I can’t believe he’s such a pussy.” He shook his head, instantly regretting what he’d said about his father.

At times in my life, a passivity has struck me. It’s a fear, that paralysis, an instinctive cowardice. The path of least resistance seems optimal. And so it was then. “What are you going to do?”
He glared at me. “You’re no use.” He looked as if he would hurt me, but instead he wiped his face dry and went into the hall, yelling, “Air, DJ, Rob, I need to talk.” Even in suffering, he couldn’t help making a scene.

The dorm was quiet again after they left. I was tired but restless, and I knew I wouldn’t be getting sleep anytime soon. So I put on my jacket and shoes and headed out for a walk. Our campus had paths throughout, but even at night you couldn’t go far without passing a group drinking none-too-subtly, a couple making out or talking intimately but loudly, a protester handing out fliers for a meeting laced with information with no context at all—the power of Christianity, the spread of AIDS, antiwar, anti-poverty, anti-sex, anti-pro. On any given night, you could get sucked into a conversation with anyone—nameless classmates, people you’d never see again, dorm mates on the way back to their rooms. You’d slide intimacies back and forth like checkers, clear the board, and go home.

But this night I thrust my hands in my pockets and walked on. I wanted to think. The eastern edge of campus bordered a run-down neighborhood, a mix of student housing, housing projects, liquor stores and check-cashing places with barred windows. One could cash a paycheck for a hefty fee, then walk twenty feet to buy lottery tickets. The word was that you shouldn’t walk through the neighborhood alone, especially at night, but I wanted to explore and wore the guise of not caring. The neighborhood was mostly black, and even in our campus enlightenment, we feared that.

Still, I walked on. People smoked and drank on their stoops, shouting conversations to people half a block away. The streetlamps were like dying stars, or like what my paltry imagination saw as dying stars.
After a few blocks, Koreatown began. There were fewer people out, and those who spoke did so in sharp diphthongs I couldn’t reconcile with anything I’d ever heard. The only constant was the poverty of the landscape, the scarred and weed-sprung sidewalk and the odor of cigarettes. Past those ten blocks, at the bottom of the hill, was the fenced-off brewery, long since shut down, the bricks and rusted pipes degrading toward the same color of earth. I marveled at the weird angles of the place that gave way to the view beyond to the city’s skyline. It was the sort of structure and backdrop that made me wish I’d become a photographer or painter.

I thought about Leonard, his rage, how useless I was to him and he to me. I walked along the fence perimeter so I could walk across the river into downtown. What should I have said to Leonard? What should I have done? I was taking an Intro to Psychology class, curious if I might pursue that as a career, as a life. A few weeks in, I’d decided against it. But at that moment, walking oblivious over the river, I thought of what I could do for Leonard. As little as we got along, as much as I despised him, he needed help. So I would offer mine to him. I would ask how he felt about his father and mother, what they’d been like as he grew up, how he saw himself. I would offer him an ear—not the loud, boasting friends he spent his days with, but the quiet, aloof, smug-but-determined-to-help roommate. I could see his boasting awkwardness for the overcompensation it was, but I would not judge him for that; I would help him understand himself so he could cope with the wreckage of his parents’ marriage.

To do all this for him, I would need to open myself. Selectively, of course, but so he could trust me, so he could recognize that he knew me and could tell what he needed to tell. I deemed my intentions noble, truly and wholly good.

Taking in my surroundings—I’d wandered to the edge of downtown farthest from campus, where the ranks of homeless thickened and the shops gave way to offices and spaces for
offices to rent—I realized how late it was, how far I’d walked, how I didn’t have money for a taxi or even the bus; though I was not lost in that I knew how to walk back toward campus, I was lost.

I began walking again. Suddenly each shadow, each bit of debris, each homeless person or lamppost in the distance, looked a terror. My legs hurt, especially my thighs, and the thought of walking home, up a hill, nearly defeated me. Every block seemed a crucial link in a long chain. At one point, near the hill where the downtown ends and the lifeless circuit of the defunct brewery begins, I saw a police officer and imagined flagging him down and begging for a ride to campus. “Please, sir, I’m tired, and it’s late.” But I didn’t want to make such a bald show of my weakness, so I walked past and nodded, afraid he might be eyeing me as a suspect even though, legally, I was clean.

The hill alongside what had once been the brewery’s parking lot winded me. At the top, I got down on one knee and sucked air through my mouth. Still, the night air had cooled so the sweat on my forehead stung, and the air I exhaled columned and vanished, columned and vanished.

By the time I got back to the dorm I was nearly in tears from exhaustion. Several times while climbing the stairs I had to steady myself with a hand on the next step. I probably looked like Australopithecus lost among Homo sapiens. My clock read 2:37 when I got in; Leonard was still gone. I turned out the lights and undressed to my boxers in the dark. With my eyes closed the earth seemed to be spinning faster, my mind too.

Around three, Leonard’s friends brought him in, each bearing an arm. Leonard was conscious-like and mumbled as his friends negotiated getting him into bed. Once they did, his
body flopping onto the mattress harder than they meant it to, one of them dragged my trash can
to his side of Leonard’s bed while the other untied Leonard’s shoes.

“Leave them on,” Leonard said, barely over the border into the land of coherence. “I want
to be buried in these shoes. Bury me in these shoes.”

“Fair enough,” his friend said, the left shoe still on, the right shoe on the floor.

“Good night, sweet prince,” his other friend said.

“Sweet frog,” Leonard said.

The one who’d been untying Leonard’s shoes, DJ, held up his palm to me as they left and
said, “No no, don’t get up. We’ll take it from here.” And they left.

My alarm went off at six. Leonard didn’t stir. Flopped out as he was, head turned to one
side, mouth wide open, he could’ve been a corpse. I showered and got dressed, then took the city
bus to the Greyhound station. We went past the courthouse and two hospitals; most of the
passengers wore name badges with small headshots.

In the station, I couldn’t help but notice I was one of three white people, and I was the
only white person with his shirt tucked in. My collar peeked out from under my sweater like a
turtle’s head from its shell. I playacted at reading an essay of Montaigne’s. After fifteen minutes,
Adam’s bus arrived. He stepped out with the half-filled gray duffel he’d had since childhood.
Seeing him with that familiar, meaningless object warmed me. A couple other passengers shook
his hand, and one woman, grossly overweight, hugged him, then waddled.

Adam’s slacks shone from wear; his sweater had a few finger-round holes. His hair and
beard reached out for connections like electricity. We hugged and headed out.
Though it was chilly and overcast, he would be giving two public talks: one on campus and another downtown. Neither was scheduled; he’d show up and talk, then spend the night and depart for the next city. I had Intro to Psych at nine, so I’d drop him off at the dorm, head to class, come back and walk him around the campus, then go to my American History seminar, which was when he’d be talking. Then lunch, and we’d head downtown so he could give his second talk.

I told him about Leonard, how he’d be either passed out or hung over, and that it might be better for Adam to hang out in the library while I was in my first class.

“Why don’t we see what’s going on first?” he said.

So we went to the room, where my backpack sat ready to go. I opened the door as quietly as I could to find Leonard sitting up, my trash can between his feet on the floor, face in his hands, body hunched like a penitent’s. A large plastic cup of water stood on our shared bedside table.

“Leo? How you doing?”

His body rose and fell with a breath. He mumbled something that sounded like, “All over.” He looked up as Adam set his duffel at the feet of my bed. “Is it ‘bring a hobo to class’ day?”

Adam laughed and stuck out his hand. Leonard shook it.

“He’s a friend from home. He’s here on short notice. He’s going to sleep on the floor, if it’s all right with you.”

Adam didn’t seem to flinch at my lie about short notice. Leonard shrugged. “Sure,” he said. “What do I care?”
Before I went to class, I got Leonard a damp, cool washcloth. He looked utterly shocked when I handed it to him before I left Adam, with Leonard’s consent, in the room.

Class I don’t remember. I do recall the trudge across campus, the stop for shitty-but-necessary coffee. When I opened the door to my room, Adam and Leonard were sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing each other. Leonard initially sprung to his feet, then wobbled to his bed.

“Relax,” Adam said, to no avail—Leonard vomited into my trash can.

I grabbed the damp, now shriveled, washcloth I’d given Leonard earlier. I held out his cup of water. He waved it away, then took it, sloshed water in his mouth, and spit into my trash can.

“How much did you drink last night?”

“Don’t ask.”

Later in life I would understand why one should wait to pose that question. I asked if Leonard needed anything else, and Adam and I left.

About a hundred yards clear of the dorm, I said, “So what did I walk in on?”

“Leo has a lot of problems,” Adam said, “like anybody else. I was counseling him, more or less.”

“What about?”

Adam smiled. “I don’t have any credentials, but he’d probably expect some level of confidentiality from me.”

“Come on,” I said. “He’s my roommate. He told me last night his parents are getting divorced and why. It’s not a big secret.”
Adam stopped walking and gave me an interrogator’s glare. He’d gotten even thinner, with high angular cheeks that protruded below his deep-set eyes, and the projection of his bones gave his face an added power. With his wild curls and fractious beard, he had the intensity of a madman. “What does Leo want to be when he grows up, so to speak?”

The question threw me. “He might major in poly sci, but he’s still undeclared.”

“So you don’t know. Why are you afraid of him?”

I straightened my backpack on my shoulder. “He told you I’m afraid of him?”

“Why do you think he talked about you? And I wouldn’t need him to tell me you’re afraid of him.”

I didn’t have a response for that.

“Why didn’t you tell him I was coming?” I opened my mouth though I didn’t yet have a response other than stutters for time, but he kept speaking. “You don’t have to answer. But you have to understand: Every person is a hive of secrets. It is best if every person can make those secrets known, and be honest, but people should not be forced to do so. The honesty of the self must develop of its own volition.” He walked again. I kept up.

“So you’re not going to tell me what you talked about, even if it might help him?”

“Only if he wants your help.” He pointed ahead to where the brick path narrowed and was flanked on both sides by four-foot-high concrete barriers. “That’s where I want to speak.”

“It’s not exactly an open area,” I said. “People can’t really gather there.”

“I know.”

I asked if he needed assistance setting up, but he had no microphone, no notes. “I’m just going to let the spirit move me.” He grinned. “I know. Keep on rolling your eyes.”
My watch alarm went off. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Good luck.” I headed to DuBois to give my presentation on the Second Great Awakening. At the door to the building, more than a football field away from Adam, I heard him yell, “Where are your gods?”

I emerged with dried sweat on my body and the post-adrenaline ebb into exhaustion in my blood, to see a small crowd dispersing. A couple of people were speaking to Adam. Except for what Leonard had rightly pegged as his hoboish appearance, he looked like a politician glad-handing. At the periphery of stragglers stood Leonard, looking at that distance none the worse for his hangover, but as I walked closer, he had the pall of alcohol sickness all over.

By the time I reached Adam, the crowd had been displaced by the next swarm leaving or going to class, heading to or from their dorms, wandering to or from something they didn’t yet know what. I’ve heard that every seven years, give or take, one’s skin cells have sloughed off to reveal an entirely new, yet utterly familiar, skin. We don’t even notice the process among the body’s more visible changes.

Adam and Leonard stood alone on the concrete barrier above me. “How’d it go?” I asked.

“It was amazing,” Leonard said. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks.”

We headed back toward the dorm, where I would drop off my backpack and Adam and I would continue toward downtown to get lunch before his second talk. We were halfway across the quad when Adam said to Leonard, “You want to join us for lunch?”

That, of course, went against my every instinct about Leonard. Thankfully, Leonard said he was still too hung over even to think about solid food.
So Adam and I went alone. At the stop for the city bus that would take us downtown, I asked, “So how did it really go?”

He shook his head. “Mixed at best. One must be able to approach like a child, but most of the college students I’ve spoken to don’t want to do that. They think they’re adults, or they want everyone around them to think they’re adults.”

“What do you say at these kinds of things?”

He smiled. “You’ll hear.”

I asked if he changed the presentation from group to group, and he seemed perplexed.

“The message is the message. It doesn’t change with fashions or ages or from person to person. I can only deliver the message and know that some listeners will discover how to hear it and that others will not.”

I was in the latter group. Or rather, he would say I was in the latter group while I would dispute the idea of the message, the context of its delivery, the very fact of him as the messenger. But, not then articulate enough to think, let alone explain, these differences, I merely said, “Leonard seemed to like it.”

He nodded. “Leonard’s attentive. He wants to be good.”

In those days, my smirk had an itchy trigger finger.

“You think you’re better than him.” The way Adam said that was strangely non-judgmental.

I’d heard this criticism before—you think you’re better than everybody else. I have my mother’s face and my father’s smugness, a pair like an ear for perfect pitch and a singing voice full of rags. But he was right; I did think I was better than Leonard. And I’d known for a while that I thought of myself that way, to the point that many times I’d acted in my head the
conversation rebutting the charge—“It’s not that I think I’m better, it’s that in some of the ways that matter, I try.” Instead of that, which even by then I knew reflected how self-righteous I really was, I said, “Well, you think you’re better than me.”

Adam watched the boarded-up windows pass by outside. “It’s complicated.”

Christian mythology relies on a certain number of echoes. God gives the law to Adam and Eve; Moses lugs down the laws to the Israelites; Jesus delivers the sermon on the mount. It isn’t solely Christian mythology, of course—we have Lincoln’s second Inaugural and Gettysburg Address, FDR’s Firesides, JFK’s “Ask not” speech, MLK’s “I Have a Dream.” We live by these standard standard-bearings, or at least keep them in a neat chronologic list of touchstones, Best Of’s, moments when word is action. I am the words your god.

So when Adam took to a concrete garbage receptacle among the downtown lunch crowd—lawyers, cubicle drones, the homeless, people awaiting trials on misdemeanor charges, businessmen and all manner of people in suits and ties and wingtips, the downtown’s architecture a pipe dream of Greek and Roman revivalism with ample parking and plenty of storefront diners—even then I knew he understood this speech or another in that tradition. His speech, a stew of the Sermon on the Mount and a bizarre hyperspiritualism, only confirmed my suspicion.

“Where are your gods?” he bellowed.

Passersby veered away, trained for this kind of city disruption, as if Adam had opened a path between the sea of people and himself. “Where are they? Where are your gods?”

“They sure ain’t here,” responded one of the nearby men in ragged uniforms at the gate of a parking lot.
“You’re right,” Adam said. “They ain’t.”

“They on vacation,” the other lot attendant said, a broad smile on his face.

I situated myself in the doorway of a building; the print on the glass read “Use Other Door→.” I had a feeling the show would end soon, barely noted by the intended audience. People loped, sped by, their heads down as if pelted by rain, though it was a sunny day. They ignored him as they ignored the cups of the homeless. (That’s not a judgment; I’ve always walked past the homeless with averted eyes.)

“Where are those gods? Are they really gone?” Two men in fine suits walked toward Adam, clearly in the direction of the courthouse. Both had briefcases. One was younger, maybe forty, his thin hair brushed across his receding hairline. He was speaking rapidly to the other and seemed to be having to walk quickly to keep up; the other man, older by at least a decade, had a precise stride. He looked ahead, clearly in control of the world, as if he’d never even stumbled as he walked. The knot of his tie was beautiful, perhaps because I hadn’t (and still haven’t) mastered tying one. It looked perfect, crafted, architectural. The man had that bulldog look of Winston Churchill.

Adam pointed at the older of the two men as they were about to pass him. “Where are your gods? What happened to your law?”

As they passed, the man replied, as easily as he might brush aside a stray hair, “Give it a rest.”

Adam seemed deflated. He watched the men go past him, past the hot dog vendor, past the two parking attendants who grinned at either Adam’s defeat or the public spectacle of the moment.
Then Adam pointed at the man who’d so casually dismissed him, held his finger outstretched for several seconds, then spoke. “What about that pang this morning as you watched your wife pull the gray tangles from her hairbrush?”

The man did a stutter step, then turned. His companion walked on a few feet, then stopped once he realized he’d gone on alone.

“You wished you’d never married her. You wished you didn’t live in that home full of nothing, that house of no children, that house full of dust. That’s what you called it.”

The man put on a false face of bemusement. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Adam kept pointing as if the tip of his finger held open a keyhole to truth. “You’ve always felt tricked into marrying her, and you even rue the moments of joy you’ve had with her.”

I doubt anyone else noticed it—maybe Adam did—but a look of terrified recognition came over the younger companion’s face, then slipped beneath a noncommittal, empty mask.

“You blame this all on your father, but you are exactly like him.”

“Don’t impugn me or my father,” Churchill said, his voice knotted in hate and confusion.

“The truth cannot impugn,” Adam said. “He said to you from the luxury of the life he raised you into to always remember your meekness, for we are all meek. You hated that man, alongside your love for him was a hatred for his lost hours at work and what you saw as the cheap wisdom he offered you between drinks.”

“You’re a clown,” Churchill said. To the bystanders, including those who’d stopped from their errands to watch the spectacle, he said, “He’s making this up.” To his thin assistant, he said, “Let’s go.” But Churchill stood his ground.

“Then walk on,” Adam said. “Walk out of this fiction into your real life. But you know that your real life is the one I’m describing, the one where you became your father, where you
became a lawyer like him though neither of you ever believed in it. You loved the smell of him, so every morning you rub talc on your arms and chest and it’s like your body is dying, turning to dust. And you hate seeing that death as you hate seeing your wife struggle with her own hair stuck in the tangles of that brush. You are angry that your father was right, that we are all meek. But he never told you the truth—when Christ said, ‘Blessed are the meek,’ he only meant those who truly knew that we are all meek, that we are all blessed with that seeming curse.”

Adam lowered his arm. His face was red, and his body seemed to teeter. But I was the only one looking at him. Everyone else watched Churchill, who seemed to have aged a decade. His shoulders had fallen and his posture slumped, so his suit jacket flapped against his thighs. His tie floated on the wind, anchored to his throat. His skin appeared ashen and waxy, as if one could clutch his cheek and pull away a palmful of clay. He set his briefcase on the ground and remained hunched.

“Where are your gods?” Adam asked. “Why did you stop believing, even when you realized you are meek?”

“But I’ve done so much,” Churchill said, puzzled as he gaped at the sidewalk before him. “Why do we have to be so meek?”

Later, over Chinese takeout, we talked about our parents. He was telling me about all the people he’d met, the connections he had in various cities, places he could stay. He interrupted himself with a greedy mouthful of eggroll when I changed the subject. “How’s your mother doing?”

He raised his eyebrows and nodded as he chewed; then he swallowed. “I think she’s fine. I haven’t talked to her in about a month.”
“Why not?” I’d flipped into inquisitor mode easily, in the manner of my favorite professor, who taught my history class with bite.

“It’s difficult to explain,” he said. “To her, I mean. She believes in what I’m doing, but she’s lonely, too. This—what I’m doing—isn’t what she had in mind. I tell her no one is lonely if they know God. She should understand that better than anybody. I would talk to her more frequently if I could. But she’s doing fine.”

I’d spoken to her more recently than he had, and I could tell from how quickly the excess joy in her voice faded to a cracking façade of need that she wasn’t doing fine. I didn’t tell him that, though; I merely judged him with my slurps of lo mein. I shouldn’t have left him with that opening.

“How are your parents?”

I chitchatted with my parents on the phone once a week, calling collect to exchange pleasantries and “uh-huh” my way through summaries of their days and the platitudes they offered in the guise of advice. “They’re good,” I said. “My father timed his sabbatical with my freshman year so he could be at home with Mom. So they aren’t empty-nesters so much.”

“And they’re happy?” he asked. “Your father’s productive? What’s your mother doing with her time?”

“Yeah,” I said, “they’re good.”

But he had me, and he knew it. His almost-smirk. Then apologetic. “I’m sorry. It isn’t a competition.”

He was impossible; he couldn’t even shoot the shit. For a long time, that was part of my measure of a person. Such a ridiculous phrase, so alien from what it actually means, but having
heard it in junior high, I attached great consequence to it—if a person could be at ease, cool, he could shoot the shit.

But Adam was above that, or apart from it. Everything had to be meaningful. I couldn’t relax as he ached after significance.

So I changed the subject—“How did you pull that trick with the lawyer?” I tried to sound dismissive though I was amazed. I could try to explain away what he’d done—the guy was a partner, Adam had somehow found out his secrets—but none of them sufficed.

“Pull that trick,” he echoed, and grinned. “It’s hard to explain.” I expected him to stop there—after all, no magician or messiah worth his salt reveals his secrets. But he went on. “Have you ever been to see a psychic? It’s a clever show, very fun when done well. They’re observant people. You walk in, and the whole thing seems chintzy and false. The beaded curtains, the low lights, the crystal ball. She comes out, acts like a flake. Rolling her eyes back, scanning your palms for lines. The way she touches your hands is weirdly intimate. It distracts you from the real trick. The best ones open with something completely out of left field so it’s impossible to take them seriously, and when they start getting things right it batters you. All the time, they’re taking in clues—clothes, jewelry, hairstyle, what you do with your hands and eyes, wedding ring or no, body language, tan. Everything. They extrapolate the basics, obvious facts and truths, then nail a couple of precise observations. The good ones take it from there, letting the client lead the way.”

“And this works?”

He beamed. “Of course it does. The best psychics know the secret peculiar to humanity: everyone wants to be saved. Everyone needs to be saved. Psychics are simply psychiatrists with better sleight of hand and a cheaper hourly rate.”
He was a little winded from chewing and talking at the same time. I could see he didn’t have this kind of conversation often, if ever—it isn’t wise to go around spilling insider knowledge.

I asked, “So that’s it? You learned sleight of hand from psychics for your messianic road show?” I didn’t intend to be so harsh.

But he’d grown a callus to my skepticism: “I do everything in plain sight; deception isn’t necessary. Besides, I’m not trying to make a buck. Earlier, all that happened was that the man dismissed the word of God—not me, but the word of God—so my father told me all I needed to know. That man’s secrets were written all over him; God gave me the ability to interpret them.”

“And the finger pointing?”

He grinned. “Okay, grant me a little showmanship. That man needed a particular route to being saved. In a sense, God is nothing if not a showman.”

After I dropped off Adam at the Greyhound station, I skipped class and went back to my dorm room. I tried to write about Adam’s visit, but Leo was unusually talkative.

“I thought you and him were friends.”

I sat at my desk, hunched over what I wrote. “We are.”

He sat back on his bed and twirled a highlighter between his fingers, a biology text open in his lap. “You don’t seem to like him very much.”

I didn’t reply, but mid-sentence in my journal, I wrote, “I don’t seem to like Adam very much, evidently.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.
I told him it was complicated and shoved my things into my bag. I found a carrel in the library and wrote for pages on a legal pad about Adam’s visit.

I can’t include here what I wrote because it doesn’t exist anymore. I didn’t know Leo was a snooper. A couple of days later, Adam’s visit a thin mist over my days, I came into our room to find Leo on my bed, reading my notebook. He didn’t startle as he had when I’d walked in on him and Adam doing whatever they were doing.

He flipped back several pages. “What does,” he began, pausing over the word, “eka, ek-uh homo mean?”

“What the fuck?” I ran at him, but, big as he was, he was also agile and slipped past me. I bounced on my thin mattress and hit the wall.

“What does it mean?” he asked, laughing. “Does it mean you’re a homo?”

I would have charged again, but he had an angry look in his eye along with his strange mirth. “Ecce homo. It means—”

“Itchy homo?” he said and laughed. “You scratch his itch, or did he scratch yours?”

I’d left our door ajar, so I stepped over and slammed it shut. “Ecce homo,” I said. “It means behold the man.” Worse than any gay joke he could’ve made was my stupid self-seriousness, laid out in front of us.

He doubled over. “So you two beheld each other?” He threw the notebook onto the floor. Pages flared, and it slid over to my feet, leaving a wake of dirt. “You couple of fags. You gave each other hickeys. I knew he was full of shit.” The way he said that last didn’t convince me, but he kept going. “And I read what you wrote about me, too.” He dropped the notebook on the floor and twisted his foot on it like he was putting out a cigarette.
I’d written that I was afraid of him, that I was sad for him, that I wanted to know what he and Adam had been doing when I walked in. But I knew what he was thinking of. I’d speculated about what he and Adam had done, what they were about to do when I walked in, and I wondered if Leo, who announced his heterosexuality to the heavens, had the same confusion as me, the same conflicting urge for a male body, even at the same time that he wanted a woman. I’d asked if he and I were essentially the same. I remember that much from what I burned.

“I can’t believe you read my journal.” My throat was parched.

“You left it lying around,” he said. I could tell he was trying to keep his armor of anger visible, cloaking what he saw as the weakness of his confusion. “I was looking for your psych notes. I saw my name.”

“Then tell me, what were you two doing when I walked in the other day?”

“We sure as shit weren’t giving each other hickeys,” he said like he was slamming a door. More calmly he said, “He wanted to talk to me about my parents getting divorced. He told me about growing up without his dad. It was cool until he talked about my soul and shit.” I could tell Adam had made Leo more self-aware; his temper was subsiding, even when he tried to insult me again. “But I’m sure you know all about it. He’s your boyfriend.” He turned away. The confrontation, for him, was over.

The need to win in some way propelled me. “He’s just some crackpot from my hometown who thinks he’s the messiah.”

There, Adam. I betrayed you.

“Messiah?” Leo said, pocketing his keys. “What the fuck?” He went out into the hall and left the door wide open, singing, “My roommate is an itchy homo.”
I saw my chance. I ran and plunged into him as he was turning to answer my footsteps. He slammed shoulder-first into the wall and fell onto the floor. I was standing over him and stepped away, unsure what to do next. That wasn’t who I was.

He rose slowly, rotating his arm. Then, quicker than quick, he landed a punch on the side of my head, between my cheekbone and my ear. The RA and another student wrestled Leo off of me; another person stood between Leo and my prone body with a hand toward me as if he would be holding me back.

“You fucking faggot,” Leo yelled. “I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

That, and the bruise swelling on my face, and the adrenaline trembling, and the ringing in my ear.

Leo never beat the shit out of me. We were forced to shake hands in front of a dean, and because I’d initiated the fight, our second, I moved my things to a cramped, shitty single two floors up. A monk in his cell, only instead of prayers to recite or scripture to copy, I had lines of poetry to memorize and formulas to drill. I expected Leo to taunt me when he saw me on campus, but instead he kept a wary eye on me—not because he was physically scared, I’m sure, but because he knew I couldn’t say for sure what had happened between him and Adam. I could sling back the same taunts he could sling at me, even if he could do so with the threat of violence. Maybe his contact with Adam and what I’d said about his being a messiah gave me some holy check, imagined in Leo’s moments alone, that protected me from real danger.

A few months later, I left Leo a note that read, “What did Adam say about his father?”

That same afternoon, I found his response slid under my door: “Why don’t you ask him.”
Chapter and Verse: The Parable of the Digger

Nineteen—

Adam went to the city to speak before crowds, to give to them the first words of God’s message. Adam saw the crowd listening, so he told them stories.

“A man grew weary of his faith. He felt himself as a grain of salt deep within a mine, crowded among the other grains, unknown and untasted. He had spent his life acting and thinking himself a good Christian, a true believer, but always with a nagging fear, a noose around the ankle of his faith anchoring him to doubt.

“And one day, outdoors with the brethren of his church, he said aloud, ‘I’ve never known God. I must work to know God.’

“His brethren looked down upon his doubt so suddenly announced and derided his search as madness and striving for attention. For he said, ‘God is not in the air, for nothing grows of the air. From ashes,’ he repeated, ‘we come, to ashes we return. From dust,’ he said, ‘to dust.’

Twenty—

“So he dug a hole in the earth. He found the driest, most barren soil he could and dug a tunnel down. On the first day, he dug a tunnel straight down, three feet across, and reinforced its sides with wood. The sun burned his back and neck.

“On the second day, he dug horizontally and reinforced the horizontal turn with planks and studs of wood. The calluses on his fingers burst against the wood handle of his shovel, and blood and pus and sweat trickled into the earth he dug. On the second day, he felt the coolness of
the air beneath the dirt as breath. His own breath was drawn hot into the dirt and exhaled back to
him in a soothing cool.

“On the third day, he began to dig downward again, all in darkness, with no flashlight or
candle and only the frailest wisp of sunlight growing down into his tunnel. He slammed his foot
against the shovel, heard the meal of dirt against the shovel’s steel tongue, and said, ‘God, when
will I find you?’

“At that moment, the ground roared, and the tunnel caved in on him. The earth shoved his
arms against his body, splayed his legs into the form of a mandrake root. The dirt buried his
shovel, buried the sunlight.

Twenty-one—

“He felt his breath cut off, a wealth of dust beneath his eyelids. He tried to scream, but a
thing he could not name—an urge, a knowing—stopped him. His heart beat quicker and louder;
he heard it among the muffling in his earth-choked ears. He continued to hear it, but he realized
his pulse had stopped and the beat continued along with the noise of breath growing ever louder.
Though he could not open his mouth, he felt his lungs rewarded with a satiating, then emptying,
satiing, then emptying ease.

“His family and brethren were blessed with mourning for him, but they also cursed
themselves with judgment at his passing. They let their anger—‘why did he have to go’—
overwhelm them. The day after his funeral, they came to his grave and found an empty place
where the flowers had been. ‘Someone stole our flowers,’ they said, so they brought more. Again
the next day, they came to find their flowers gone, their mourning defiled in their eyes. So they
brought even more.
“Every day for a week passed thus, so the widow one day brought flowers, then watched
her husband’s grave from a distance. In the afternoon, as the sun trudged west to vespers, the
flowers dissipated into the air as dust.

“So the widow and her children moved to distance themselves from the mystery of his
grave. But in the month that passed, grass grew on only the patch of earth where the man had
died, around the headstone his family had set for him. Still dust and sand surrounded the patch,
even as flowers burst from the earth with heads like daffodils. All the people who lived around
marveled at the fertile oasis, where within minutes one could watch a stem rise inches from the
earth, burst a daffodil-halo bloom that, within a few more minutes, alit and dissipated as the stem
turned pale and curled back into the ground.

Twenty-two—

“The flowering happened several times each day, and all the people of the town relieved
themselves of their work to watch. Their calluses diminished, but their skin still burned in the
sun as it had when they toiled in the fields.

“They went hungry as their fields went untended. They feared the flowering, a fear of not
knowing, even as they awed at its process. But one day, a little girl, a daughter of one of the
fathers, was hungry and went forward to the flowers, unnoticed until she stood in the grass. She
reached down, plucked a blooming bulb, and ate it as her father cried out. She smiled. Then, as
the flowers did, she dissipated into the air. The flowers stopped blooming.

“So the men went to their homes and brought back shovels and near the plot of grass dug
tunnels downward. They tried to bring the dirt down on themselves. Some succeeded and died;
other failed and lived. But that ground they dug remained a barren field of dirt with the merest patch of grass an oasis of life among them.”

Twenty-three—

Adam’s crowd sat, enraptured and stunned. A silence tiptoed among the crowd. They thanked him for his story and glowed with whatever understanding they had. Some in the audience asked him to heal them, and he stayed past nightfall laying hands and words on each human vessel of trust.

Later, his disciples asked him, “Sir, Adam, what does your story mean? Tell us what we should know.”

But Adam replied, “Why should you ask me? That crowd that listened along with you did not ask. They did not say, ‘For what do you tell this story? What should we know?’ And you, who are closest to me, who think you know me best, must ask me to make clear the words I have said.”

“But Adam,” one said, “we are not testing our faith in you, we are testing our faith in ourselves. We want to know if we have heard you right, if our ears have heard and our eyes seen correctly.”

And he said, more sweetly and kindly, “trust both the parables I tell and the parabolas your minds form, for all derive themselves from something that, in itself, finds its derivation from God. For as the man of the story digs in search of God, so shall you with the stories I tell and the life I lead, the lives you follow.”

One asked, “Is that the meaning of your story?”
“What did I just say?” Adam replied. “Do you have ears? Do they exist or serve you if you do not use them?”

Thus was the matter settled.
Sophomore year, I fell in love. Marie. We met at a party. A guest of someone invited, I wallflowered, nursing box wine out of a plastic cup and watching people flirt. Art posters were tacked to the wall and curled at the edges. The first thing she said to me, from behind, was, “Excuse me, why are you so anxious?”

I turned. She was smiling up at me. She was short, stocky with round breasts and a curl-wracked brown ponytail. I told her I wasn’t anxious. Her smile widened. She put her hand on my arm, and I twinged. But her hand seemed to absorb that and dissipate it in the air.

I don’t remember much else from that night other than sneaking looks at her cleavage and making out with her as we stood on the sidewalk. Even when someone clapped me on the shoulder while we kissed, I didn’t care.

We seemed to skip past dating into frenzied intimacy. I missed her when she was gone, and I thrilled to hear her say—impossibly, it seemed—she missed me. I can’t pinpoint the moment I knew I loved her, but knowing I was in her thoughts had a lot to do with it. We studied in a dim nook of the student center, facing each other with our legs twined. We put movies on in her dorm room and touched each other under the blanket. We became we, so our friends always asked if we could come to something, not if one of us was available.

She seemed clean from affectation, whether flaring her nostrils to be funny or explaining haltingly why she was an agnostic and not an atheist. She liked her parents, called them Momma and Daddum; when I mocked those names, she was hurt like a child and couldn’t hide it. She poked holes in my pretensions, and she eased me. She said that she liked to watch me walk, that I had good taste, that hearing my voice after being apart was like inhaling after holding her breath.
I became confident and, oddly enough, much less cocky. I was nicer to people, and even my mother noticed over the phone. So, red-faced, I explained about Marie.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” my mother said, which troubled my nerves for weeks.

We’d been together three months when we were lying in her bed after watching a fuzzy tape of *The Conversation*. I was saying something about Gene Hackman sitting alone in his torn-up apartment, playing his saxophone with nothing else left to do. During my pause, she said, “Tom, I love you.”

Her eyes glistened, damp. It was probably the happiest moment of my life. I’d been wanting to say it, but afraid. “I love you, too,” I said. We kissed, and I held my stupid tears back. Later, after we fooled around, I told her she was so brave.

Marie first learned about Adam under a circumstance I’d rather have avoided. He’d left a message at my dorm. I called him back on the lobby payphone. He said he’d be coming through town again, and I lied and said I’d be upstate with friends. Even in the middle of the school week, yes. It was spring, and we wanted to take advantage of the sun. I was trying to sign off—though I hadn’t heard from him in over a year—when Marie came in bearing a warm pan of homemade lasagna. (We were still pitching our woo.)

“That your folks?” she said brightly; I replied by holding up an index finger—wait. The idea of chatting with my parents intrigued her. She spoke with hers twice and week and chastised me for only talking to mine every few weeks.

I told Adam I was sorry and wished him good luck.

“Who was that?” Marie asked.

I told her it was nobody. I didn’t even greet her. She asked when I was going out of town.
“I’m not,” I said, awash in my father’s exasperation, my genetic inheritance. “I don’t want to see this person. So what’s this?”

We went up to my room; I didn’t even carry the food. She set the lasagna down on my desk and shook her arms out.

“So.” She stood with her hands on her hips, what I called her Wonder Woman pose. But she was serious. “Who was that on the phone?”

I told her it wasn’t a girl or anything, only someone from high school I didn’t want to see. She laughed. “I know it wasn’t a girl. I just want to know who you were talking to, that’s all.”

“It’s nobody. That’s all.”

“But that’s the point,” she said. “That’s everything. You never tell me anything. You haven’t even thanked me for the lasagna. I spent three stupid hours in Shelly’s apartment on this thing.”

I forced her into a hug and said I was sorry. “That’s it, of course. I’m so happy you made this.”

She wormed her way out of the hug. “No, that’s not it. It’s always stuff you know and people you’ve heard of. Nietzsche and Schrödinger’s box and the Moral Majority and never you. I want to know about you.”

She wadded her green knit cap in her hand, ready to go. I could hear the Frisbee dudes behind the dorm calling to each other, utterly at ease. I saw my options—she could leave, and that would be the end of our relationship, essentially. That would’ve been easier, in a way. Or I could fess up and talk about myself instead of deflecting everything into “this reminds me of X, who had all these weird ideas about Y.”
I sat on my bed. “It’s embarrassing.” Of all the times in my life I’d felt that, it may have been the first time I voiced it.

She put a finger against the dish she’d brought, crinkling the foil. “So’s this.”

So I told her about Adam. I told her about his father—his unknown flesh and blood and his claim of the unknowable father above; about his belief that in the woods he spoke to God; about how I spent my childhood as his cut-rate Sancho Panza; about how I tried to help him that one night in high school but he didn’t want my friendship; about his sermons and healings and cheap magic.

Marie listened. She didn’t ask questions but took in everything. When she didn’t react with the warmth I’d hoped for, I upped the ante. I put phrases in Adam’s mouth—“I am the Lord your God.” When I told the story of his cafeteria scene, I had that carton of milk hit him in the face. He threw trays, screamed at the sins of our peers, and all the while I tried to talk him down.

“So he’s coming through town to sermonize, and he’ll want me to be his sidekick again.”

She ran her fingers into my hair. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m sorry. That’s hard.” She hugged me, and when a friend of mine came in, Marie and I didn’t even slip apart.

In that way, I kept her away from Adam for two years. She asked about him for a while. Was he schizophrenic, or maybe manic? I’d never thought of that before, so inured was I to him. But she was taking psych. I found myself endorsing his sanity, the same way I’d guarded myself against a mild diagnosis from Marie the week prior, as I’d defended Marie from her own diagnoses. That’s how college worked—what we studied seemed either as irrelevant to our lives as dust on a light bulb or as central as our very eyes.
She asked about his sermons. I’d only heard the one; I told her it sounded like a fusion of the Sermon on the Mount and a preachy, intense self-awareness. Know thyself, and know thyself some more, and never stop looking for God, and never assume you’ve found anything.

It was hard to articulate without his charisma that what he argued for seemed truly compelling at times when he voiced it.

And during those two years, he voiced it a lot, evidently. Seattle, L.A., Carson City, Denver, through Arizona and New Mexico and Texas, across the Southeast and up the East Coast and back through the Midwest. Scattered newspaper reports, which I found many years later (only recently, in fact), describe how small lunchtime crowds grew, how moviegoers left theaters empty and stood in parking lots listening to this gnostic man who wasn’t selling anything—no pamphlets, no books or VHS tapes, no CDs or T-shirts or life coaching or even a church. I spoke to June every week, and once in a while she’d have news. An old friend in Des Moines had put Adam up for the night, and he’d told her of his time in Baltimore, Morgantown, D.C. and Philly and Columbus and Dayton and St. Louis. He’d seen people and sadness and desperation and need and hope and, oh yeah, the monuments, too.

There are rumors of miracles, but these are impossible to track. Around the times of his various performances, there are news reports of suicides, but I could connect none of these to him. The few I investigated further led to the point where I would’ve had to go into the homes of grieving relatives, an uncredentialed stranger, and ask questions that interrogated the most cobwebbed corners of guilt. “Pardon me for asking, but before your daughter killed herself, did she mention someone named Adam? Did she suddenly become religiously inclined? Oh, I ask for no reason.” Dredge that soil, and unknown toxins will rise too.
But I knew none of this at the time. Adam became a mildly discomforting fiction I could handle as I pleased.

Except, of course, for June.

June I spoke to once a month. Marie had class in the sculpture studio. She knew nothing about June, though June knew plenty about her. I told June of my grades and what I’d learned, my new friends. June hardly ever told me anything about her life. She had occasional updates about Adam or stories about conversations with my folks—“you should give them a call this weekend”—but I looked forward to the regularity of these calls, the plain, unfreighted give-and-take. Though I admit I also hoped for something more from those calls. One secret about Adam, some detail about his father.

During our junior year, Marie met my parents. I remember my anxiety more than anything else about the visit—they were as dull and unmemorable as a hug. I recall appreciating them much more after they met Marie. I met her parents, stern, reticent people as unlike Marie as they could have been. But they were kind enough to me, and they clearly loved Marie.

She and I stayed in the city the summer after our junior year. She waited tables; I worked in the local library—all day on Fridays and Saturdays. We moved in together and began an intensely sweet, then tense, then normal domestic orbit. She was less fastidious about dishes than I’d expected; I was less respectful of the surprising amount of reading time she needed than she expected. But we stubbornly adapted.

I loved living with her; it confirmed my decision to propose. I wanted to wait, though—I planned for a post-graduation trip to Joshua Tree, which she was obsessed with despite never having been there. She’d read about western flora as a kid, and the Joshua tree—spiny,
bulbous—loomed in her imagination as a talisman. She loved its shape, the fact that it survived in such difficult conditions, that the place itself was the geologic product of thousands of years of change.

I announced the trip as a Christmas gift; she trilled in joy. She didn’t know, but I planned to kneel on a trail and offer her my life and love.

But then things changed. Over Christmas break, Marie’s brother Parker, an aimless college dropout who lived with their parents, got arrested for trashing a grocery in the middle of the night. While the overnight stockers were taking their break, he and his friends had broken windows, knocked over shelves, spilled rows of food onto the floor. To top it off, he punched one of the returning stockers and tried to fight a policeman who showed up. He was sternly, humorlessly drunk. Marie’s parents had to pay lawyers’ fees and bail, and keep an eye on Parker to boot. He blamed them and the “shithole, no-horse town” they raised him in. He blamed Marie for taking all their affection, for needing their money for college, for not being a good enough sister, for not being someone he could talk to.

Then, the first week of classes after Christmas, Marie’s mother called to say she’d been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s. She’d planned to tell Marie face-to-face over break, but with everything going on with Parker, she didn’t want to deal with the drama of Marie worrying over her. Marie, whom I thought of as truly strong and imperturbable, was devastated. I could do nothing to make her feel better; for two days she veered between stony depression and sobbing. I couldn’t tell what triggered her moods. I hugged her, wiped her tears, let her squeeze my hand until it hurt, tried to remind her that the diagnosis gave her mother a pretty strong possibility for recovery and remission.
Marie, who’d never been anything less than a model student, skipped most of her classes the second week of the semester. She ate junk food, which she’d never done as long as I’d known her, and lazed about the apartment. Out of the blue, she told me she was going to visit her family over the weekend. I’d suggested she do so the day she found out, but she’d said nothing about it until she gave me two hours’ notice about her bus ticket. I didn’t have her parents’ number, and she didn’t call while she was gone, didn’t even let me know when she was coming back. On Monday, I came back from my afternoon classes to find her curled up on our second-hand sofa, her still-packed suitcase in the middle of the floor.

All she told me about the trip was that she hated her brother, and that he was probably right that she was selfish. I tried to convince her otherwise, but she’d steeled herself against any good word.

After another day on the couch, she careened back into her studies. All the time, though, she complained about the workload of her senior capstone project, in which she wanted to reconcile psychiatric treatments using psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral therapies. The library didn’t have the books she needed, her field-research hours and interviews weren’t providing useful material, she didn’t see how she could write the fucking thing since she was already behind. By staying so loyally on schedule for my own capstone project, I was making it worse. She only said that once, but once was enough.

Though we did have some happy moments during spring semester, I only really remember her moods. I had no idea how to help her, so I withdrew. Our apartment became a mess, and she put on weight. Her belly spilled over the lip of her jeans. About once a week, she’d say, “I’ll never graduate. I might as well move into a halfway house with Parker.”
I logged incredible amounts of hours in the library—not only to study, though I did find myself more studious than ever. I also chose where to sit by cute girls nearby. A young-looking grad student who worked most of her hours at the information desk filled the spotlight in my fantasies. I was a shy, tentative lover, but I imagined rough, reckless sex with her, though she looked the type even less than I actually was.

During Spring break, I stayed in town while Marie went home. She promised to call every day, which she did. Most days, though, I wasn’t home. Campus cleared out, so I saw things I hadn’t seen. I ate at the Afghani restaurant, I went to dumb movie matinees, I drank at bars I’d always been curious about—a frat-boy joint, two dives, a jazz club Marie wanted me to take her to. I spent from the cache I’d been saving for Joshua Tree—not out of malice, but because it was the only money I had to spend. I didn’t make a real dent in it—maybe a nice meal’s worth—but I felt guilty all the same, as I probably should have.

When Marie and I did talk on the phone, she sounded refreshed. Her mother was barely symptomatic and doing well with treatment, and her parents seemed to have discovered a new joy and verve—they’d revealed personalities as outgoing as Marie’s. Even Parker was better. He was still sullen, with reserves of ferocity under the surface, but he’d also apologized for the things he’d said. They talked for hours one night and cried and hugged, a great shared catharsis. (She even said catharsis on the phone, a happy shift from the monosyllabic depressed Marie of late.) I was a little jealous—sure, I was petty, but I was alone—but I looked forward to having my old Marie home.

But I didn’t get my old Marie home. Her last day there, she took her mother to chemo. The day she left, her mother was vomiting and dizzy, unable to eat, couldn’t even stand up to hug Marie. Marie saw herself as the cause—when she stayed, her mother’s illness abated; when
she left, her mother’s immune system lost its guard. She said as much to her family, and Parker, who’d been there through several post-chemo illnesses, told Marie to stop being so melodramatic.

Marie had my sympathy, she really did. But it was as if I was nothing but a sack of flesh to cry on. She stopped asking about me; she’d respond to the most innocuous comment by saying, “You sound like Parker.” Those innocuous comments? I reassured her that she wasn’t the trigger for her mother’s symptoms. How could I apologize for that?

Even with all that going on, I put a down payment on the engagement ring. I helped organize all her papers for her capstone and even confirmed a couple of her interview appointments. I thought school was stressing her out as much as anything else; I believed that once we graduated we’d go on our trip and everything would right itself. Her mother’s cancer would be in remission, and a future of possibilities would bob happily in the horizon. In the meantime, her mood stomped about the house.

Things were thus when Adam inserted himself into our life. I was out when he called; Marie was home. When I walked in the door, Marie was in as good a mood as she’d been for months.

“Your mom?” I mouthed, pointing at the phone.

“Adam,” she said. “Guess who finally walked in the door.”

And like that—my backpack still over both shoulders, my brain and body desiring a nap—I had the phone against my ear. The cord anchored me to the kitchen wall, and Adam’s voice—at first unrecognizable as Adam’s; that’s how long it had been—told me how much he was looking forward to seeing me in a week.
“I offered to let him stay here,” Marie told me once I got off the phone.

I asked where he was going to sleep, and she gestured to the sofa. I shrugged my heavy backpack onto it.

“What’s wrong?” she said, though she inflected it as if to say, “What wrong with you?”

To this day, I can’t hear the words “what’s wrong” without hearing her voice.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked. Had she forgotten all the things I’d told her?

“But I talked to him for hours,” she said. “He doesn’t sound like the person you described.”

“Of course he doesn’t,” I said. “He’s a charlatan.” I finally took off my jacket. I was sweaty, and reeked. It had been uncomfortably warm in the library, that sleepy heat they always had in winter and spring, and I strode home fast as always, despite the extra weight. I had something like a hot flash. “Do you think I lied about him? Do you think I’m a liar?”

“No,” she said. She looked chidden—her head hung, her hair a scatter around her face. “But he was kind on the phone. He made me feel better about my mom.”

The week leading up to Adam’s visit was a tense détente. Marie bought an air mattress. Before I even complained, she said, “It’s my money.” She’d known what I was thinking, but I let it go, inasmuch as I could. One night I fell asleep on the sofa while reading for a class. When I woke up around 1 a.m., I pulled the nearest blanket over my body and rolled over. The next morning, she tried not to be furious that I hadn’t come to bed; she wasn’t successful.

The night before Adam arrived, I thought of myself as making my last stand. After we ate dinner, I followed her into the bedroom and told her I thought it was important for us to talk. I said I was sorry, that maybe I’d been wrong about Adam or maybe I’d changed—maybe he’d
changed. I told her I felt foolish and helpless that I couldn’t seem to offer her the support she needed or make her smile, but Adam needed only a few minutes on the phone to do both. I told her I worried I was losing her and, in the process was losing myself, the part of me she’d taught me how to find. That had the ring of truth, of wisdom, at the time.

I talked and talked, purging months’ worth of irrationality and fear. I don’t remember most of what I said; I finished by saying, “I’d like to listen better to you.”

She hugged me; she cried; she smiled. We reconciled; we made love. We lay in bed, damp. I cracked some joke that gave her the giggles. I fell asleep happy, assured.

I overslept and made it to my Religious Movements seminar ten minutes late, unshowered and without breakfast. Morgenthal, our professor, treated multiple absences as tantamount to high treason, and I’d already blown my one. My friend Farouk was giving a presentation on the schismatic Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius and referred to me as a visual example.

I should mention that I’ve always had a paltry notion of friendship. I’ve rarely had more than one close friend at a time, and I’ve never been part of a larger group of people with shared experiences or whatever it is that makes a group of friends. Marie’s friends became mine; my courses provided me with people I got coffee or a beer with after lectures. If I had another class with someone the following semester, great—we became a little closer. If not, that was okay. The library and student center brought people back into my orbit—or me back into theirs—long enough to summarize months in a minute before parting ways again. Such is life. I’d said and heard the phrase “We should hang out” so many times that it almost seemed like a formal greeting. You say goodbye, I say we should hang out. Definitely.
Adam didn’t seem to have that concern. He had groups of people everywhere willing to tell him anything, willing to listen or offer a bed. I like to think I had a privileged position as his first—and closest—friend. Even if he’s nothing but an imposter, it’s amazing to think that you were so crucial to someone’s idea of friendship, that you formed an impression so ingrained that the other person found companions in your image (and, as the case may be, spent years or a lifetime correcting the false impressions of camaraderie you created). Thanks to you, the other person believes that true friendship requires un-self-consciousness, unspoken but shared expectations—or, on the other hand, that it requires a level of distrust, the occasional saber-rattling and anger.

Or maybe that first friendship doesn’t matter. You disappear into a forgotten, fragmented past that only rarely bobs to the surface for air. Maybe the other person easily recrafts his worldview to his or her liking and connects and reconnects as easily as dandelion tufts fly loose in wind.

Anyway: after my class, Marie and I rode the city bus to the Greyhound station; she squeezed my hand to release my nerves, like old times. Adam’s bus pulled up a couple of minutes after ours did. He looked more or less the same, only more fully bearded. Still skinny, his eye sockets retreating into his face in a way that seemed to invite you in. Marie recognized him instantly even though she’d never seen a picture.

We walked to a ratty but well-liked barbecue place where the patrons were split between rich white lawyers (I have always thought of men in suits as lawyers), their ties tucked between buttons of their crisp shirts, and black men and women in uniforms of papery cloth. Lunch was cheap but good; on the wall behind the counter hung a photograph of the owner and his wife with the state’s two white senators.
While we waited for our food, I pointed to one of the lawyers and asked Adam if he remembered converting one of those on his previous trip.

“Yes,” he said. “The man who hated his wife.”

Marie wanted Adam to say more, and I wanted him to tell the story, to push its boundaries toward Marie’s incredulity. I did this under the guise of really wanting to hear him talk.

“There’s not much to tell,” he said. “Stories become boast and aura so easily. That was in what seems like another city. Besides, the man is dead.”

A tremor of shock. “How do you know that?”

“I simply do.”

“You seemed to know everything about the man,” I said. “You let the world know his secrets.”

I knew that would irk Marie, who treasured privacy.

But Adam had the response that satisfied Marie: “That man wore his secrets on his face.”

On the bus ride back to campus, Adam asked Marie about her parents and brother. Much of what she told him I already knew, but some was news to me—that Parker had already switched medications once since Christmas, that her parents had been quietly considering divorce before the diagnosis. I stayed mute but wondered why she hadn’t told me these things before. And I was puzzled why she was talking about her family so openly now; with the noise of the bus and its labored accelerations, they had to speak up so other riders were likely to hear.

When we got off at the campus stop, Adam took a deep breath and said, “This rings a bell.” Then he turned to Marie and said, “How about your mother? Does she still feel guilty?”
I stopped us walking. “What does her mom have to feel guilty about?” I had become protective of Marie’s mother in my own way.

Marie and Adam looked at each other; she seemed to give him a quiet nod.

“Her own mother,” Adam said, “had a similar cancer. She’s worried she’s passed the gene on to Marie, and she wishes she’d been more aggressive in keeping an eye on her own health.”

I said that was silly and that Marie’s mother had no reason to think she was responsible for her daughter’s health, and I led us on toward our apartment.

I skipped my afternoon class to watch Adam’s sermon. While our campus was tolerant of most ministry—sellers of *Animal House* posters and batik art, the Libertarian Club and Rush Week, even the College Republicans—we were downright mean to the religious proselytizers. Of course, they had it coming. They told us we were sinners, were lost, that in our sexual curiosity and secularism we violated God’s love and law. So we crowded around and mocked, carrion-feeding on the extremism of outsiders. Our lamest jokes received roars of laughter because we were one force against the men who’d come to condemn us. They brought crude posterboard signs with bright yellow letters and hokey images of the fires of hell; they wore staid haircuts with clean-lined parts; they gestured with their floppy personal Bibles; they handed out pocket-sized green New Testaments while quoting from the Old. And they were mean, evidently never having lived through their own twenties. Every set of dreadlocks, every acne scar, every hole in someone’s jeans became fodder for the spiteful remarks they peppered their condemnations and citations with.
I usually sat on the perimeter of these performances, enjoying the barbs my peers tossed into the center of the circle from where the preacher condemned us. My favorite heckler was Bead Man. No matter the season, he showed up at the front of the crowd with tacky plastic Mardi Gras beads and yelled, “Show us your tits!” That always stymied the preacher, especially when the crowd—even the feminists swept up in the wave—chanted “Show your tits! Show your tits!” It wasn’t subtle.

Most of the time, though, people interrupted the preacher whether he was documenting our sins or offering his glimpse of Heaven above. Theology had less to do with our mockery than the pleasure of being right.

Only once did I take part as anything other than a laughing spectator. One of the older preachers to visit kept quoting the Bible without citation. If we’d learned anything from being in college, it was to be skeptical of unreferenced excerpts. At one point he quoted the Old Testament: “I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto them that hate me. Exodus, Chapter 20, Verse 5.”

He hung a condemnatory quiet on the end of that quote, so I called out, “Deuteronomy, 24:16.”

He looked at me, perplexed, with a kind of awe. I think he thought I was on his side.

So I continued: “‘The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.’ You want to judge us? Why don’t you judge yourself?”

I got applause and felt self-righteous. After all, I’d struck down a man with no one on his side. He’d had the perverse courage to go into a free-speech zone and pretend to transmit God’s judgment—or, who knows, maybe he believed he was God’s conduit—on people who would
never give him a fair listen. (Not that he deserved one.) And even though I was an atheist and doggedly against the cynical evangelical hate of Falwells and Robertsons, I regretted that no one had sent a thoughtful interlocutor to campus. There were harmless, generic Christian clubs and the full-throated haters but no one who could present a remotely plausible vision of the good and of God.

That’s why I skipped class to see Adam do his thing: he would fail miserably for an audience that cared nothing for his kind, or he would offer something they’d never seen. I expected resistance to him, but I also hoped he’d do well, in a way. As much as I wanted the wool removed from Marie’s eyes, she seemed to have some of her old energy back. If Adam could heal her in some way—psychosomatic as the cure might be—I wanted that for her. I suppose one could call that my personal growth; only years or even months before, I would’ve begrudged anyone their faith, especially faith in Adam.

So we went to the mini-quad and waited for the crowds to move toward and from class. Unlike the preachers who tried to curse us, Adam had no signs or props. Marie asked how he’d attract people.

“Whoever listens, listens,” he said. If he offered some salvation to only one person, he would succeed. That salvation would grow and extend to others.

“Loaves-and-fishes style,” I said.

It took him a moment. “Something like that.”

At fifteen till, once people crossed on the sidewalks that demarcated the quad—with only a few exceptions, people kept to the sidewalks—Adam rose his arms and spoke. I couldn’t have prepared myself for his words.
“There is no God,” he said. “Not one.” His voice seemed to resonate as part of the quarter-hourly bells from the campus chapel. “Gather and listen to the truth I have to tell: there is no God. Not one.”

Most of the people walking past paused for a moment before continuing on toward their lives, but within moments, Adam had a couple dozen semicircled around him, with people continuously joining like flotsam tossed by waves onto a rock.

“We have our many faiths,” he said, “our many names of Gods and heroes. God, Yahweh, Allah, Adonai. But we cannot see these figures. Long ago, people wouldn’t speak or spell the name of Yahweh, Christians still substitute Christs and Popes for God, and anyone who draws an image of Mohammed or Allah sins against Islam’s God. Just as we cannot see love or hate or truth, we cannot identify or even sketch that thing we call God in whatever faith we have.

“This is nothing new. Long ago, theologians—the ones who tried to give words to the idea of God—came up with a way to understand God. They called it negative theology. Name everything that God is not, and eventually you narrow down to what God might or must be.”

He pointed far to his right, and all of us—by then several dozen—turned our heads to see. “There is no God.” He pointed to his left, and this time only half the crowd followed. “There is no God.” He pointed to his palm, then to his chest. “There is no God. There is no God.

“But isn’t there something in there, aside from all our organs? Not a soul, but a something? An invisible compass? Our word God comes from old German. Auf deutsch, it meant ‘to invoke’ or ‘to pour.’ As in something invoked or something poured from one vessel into another. So God is that thing we invoke each time we say ‘God.’ We say, ‘we invoke you, our God.’
“Or so it should be. We say God as forgetfully as we breathe, and only sometimes as deeply as we breathe. At the wedding at Cana, when Jesus said pour some water out and it was wine, he was saying, ‘You will pour God into that cup, and you will drink God, the same as when we drink the blood of Christ from the chalice.’

Someone several people behind me laughed—first a stifled, airy laugh, then a cackle. We turned to see who it was; the crowd seemed to instinctively part so Adam could see. A shaggy guy in a flannel shirt and torn jeans—every part of him seemed to be conceding to gravity thread by thread—was hunched, laughing, his shoulders bobbing.

“What’s so funny?” Adam asked.

Once he stopped giggling, thread man said in the voice of Billy Dee Williams, “Christ 45. Works every time.”

A few in the crowd snickered, but most of us—even me—took a kind of offense on Adam’s behalf. We turned to Adam, awaiting his response.

He laughed a single quick exhalation. “That’s funny,” he said. “Funny, and a sign of how distant we are from the Christ of the nomads. The world provides so much noise to interrupt the signals we strive to hear, so all our old meanings are gone. In truth, though, those meanings were never ours. And those of you who did not laugh were so stern, as if your seriousness could protect the truth of what I say from something so simple and honest as that laugh. But why must our image of Christ be protected? Why must we defend the God that we have never seen, that we could never see? Is God so meek?

“So if we want something we must call our God, we must have a new Christ. For Christ has become like the image one sees through a kaleidoscope. And we must shatter it.”
I kept an eye on the man who’d laughed. He seemed taken by the way Adam had handled him, impressed by Adam’s willingness to accept the joke and pivot with it.

“And out of those pieces, which have already been broken for generations, we must create a new understanding of that thing we call God.

“So what is God? A laugh? A shout in the street? The still point of the turning world? The accumulation of all power and all knowledge and all knowing? The ultimate compassion? Is it, like breath, the answer to its own question?

“God, Adonai, Yahweh, Allah, Gautama, that thing, noun and verb, needs a new language, a language spontaneous and unknown and new and forever forgotten. A genuine striving after words.”

Here Adam began to speak in what I thought was a badly mispronounced French, but what it occurred to me was a speaking in tongues of sorts. He continued for maybe half a minute his babbling gibberish. Then he spoke again in English.

“That was no speaking in tongues,” he said. “I don’t know the language, the words, or the name of that thing we call God. But to find it, we must strive continually, knowing we will find no answer. We will sense ourselves close, but our senses and our minds will never have that reciprocation of touching the thing sensed. Knowing that, however, we must strive. We must accept death as death accepts us, with no lies or stories of a place of peace, no Heaven or Valhalla or Paradise or Gardens. No afterlife, as there is no antelife.

“God is no Father, no Mother, no family at all. Neither noun nor verb nor adjective, yet all at once. Negative and positive.”

I looked over at Marie; her face was flushed, a wedding of joy and sadness.

“Close your eyes,” Adam said. “Close them.”
I closed mine; I assume most others did, too.

“Close your eyes,” he said again. “Feel your breath enter your body and traverse the spaces you cannot go in that dark cavern. Use your breath to understand the shape of those spaces.” I tried to do so, but I felt silly in the same way my one visit to Marie’s yoga class did. “Let all your senses work, even your eyes as they are closed—let them trace the colors of the dark. Loosen the reins on your senses until they seem as one. Then you can open your eyes.”

I followed my breath, let my mind’s skittering slow itself. I seemed a whole being, focused, clear. Something—I thought Marie—nudged my shoulder. I thought of and seemed to feel Adam’s mouth raising a hickey to my neck.

I opened my eyes.

Adam was gone.

The great magicians don’t simply disappear, of course; their reappearance is usually the most important part of the trick. Vanishing offers no satisfaction. There are exceptions, of course—D. B. Cooper jumping from an airplane with $200,000 in cash, never to be found (discounting a couple of fame-hungry deathbed confessors). And Jesus Christ, of course. Not to be impertinent yet again, but it’s worth thinking about this way. Christ disappears into his tomb. But then he reappears—they didn’t even know they were watching a trick! So he reappears, lets everyone know he’ll return, then disappears once more. And we’re still waiting for the end of that illusion.

But Adam’s magic was simply and neatly done. He reappeared—not that he had ever disappeared; his audience merely closed its eyes—among the crowd, toward the back. The hand I’d thought was Marie’s was likely his.
And that was it. People waited for him to continue speaking, to make sense of the experience we’d shared, to tell us about the God we didn’t know. Give us a name. Our daily bread.

But he offered nothing. Because he’d had no finish, the performance seemed awkward, as if some mild prank had been played on us all. And not by Adam—he shared in our awkwardness as we stood like idiots, looking around for something else.

The edges of the crowd peeled off, shuffled away. But those immediately around Adam asked questions, quietly and deferentially, as if each person thought he was having a private moment with him.

I was too far away to hear what anyone said. Marie knit her fingers with mine and said, “That was amazing.”

“Yeah,” I said. Yeah.

Adam spent an eternal half-hour conversing with dazed supplicants. Marie and I kept our distance. From what I could tell, he offered no miracles and cured no illnesses. Every few minutes, Marie said something like, “I loved what he said about searching for God.”

Each time she spoke, I said nothing. I was torn—his performance and his trick of getting our eyes closed was genuinely moving, but what he’d said seemed like a half-baked mishmash of Zen and medieval asceticism. I couldn’t figure out what he’d offered, what—if any—theology he had. It seemed deliberately impossible to place, so the degree to which he moved me was diminished by my resistance, my hunch that it was a mere trick.

When he was done, we all went back to the apartment. He lagged behind us, clearly exhausted. Marie told him how great he was, and I nodded. We were quiet the rest of the way back.
Marie went to the kitchen to make dinner and give me and Adam “time to reconnect and stuff.” She prepared a casserole with a thousand little steps, which kept her clanging in the kitchen. I wanted to remind her she should spend her time on her capstone, that we didn’t need a fancy dinner that took a couple hours of prep, but her enthusiasm edged out reason.

Adam sat deep into our dead-sprunged couch. His eyes were closed, and his head lolled back against the windowpane. I pulled a book into my lap and thumbed its pages, but I ended up watching him in repose. Among the briar of his sideburns sat a dime-sized bare patch. His eyelids, blue-veined, fluttered as if his eyeballs pinwheeled beneath.

“Are you watching me?”

“No,” I said, opening my book at random. I asked if he wanted to sleep.

“No,” he said, sounding exhausted. “I’ll sleep later.” He gazed at the ceiling; he seemed to be counting the innumerable plastic nubs.

“So what was that today?” I asked.

“You were there. You tell me,” he said. “I like your place. Seems comfy.”

“It’s not bad. Honestly, today seemed like a cute little trick. Not to discount it, but it reminded me of the magic kit you had when you were a kid. The rings and stuff, the wand with the silk flowers inside.”

“Marie seemed impressed.”

She stepped from the kitchen. “My ears are burning,” she said. “And dinner’s ready.”

I decided, for the sake of a pleasant evening, not to challenge Adam, but instead to let politesse suffuse the room like candlelight.
I must be a terrible sleeping partner. Whenever the other person stirs, I pop awake, so the women I’ve shared a bed with have apologized far too much for waking me. So it was that night when Marie got up around midnight. I listened to the bathroom door nudged flush, the faint tinkle of, well. I waited for Marie to return because I knew if I dozed, I’d start awake and irritated when she worked her body back into the sheets.

But I fell asleep and awoke—not at her coming back, but at the bathroom door grudging against its frame. Her feet padded away from the bedroom, not toward, and moments later the intermittent hum of voices ghosted through the wall. I listened though there were no words, even their voices void of distinction by the walls and whatever lives between them. I waited; I sat up; I watched the dark articulate itself.

Then the heater cleared its throat and wheezed to life, muting the drone of their conversation. I put my head back to my pillow; I swore I heard the noise of a thousand conversations through the pillow. So I got up and went to the wall, put my ear and cheek to the cold plaster. It felt like bone, and the noise of the pipes offered itself to me more fully. I was privy to the secrets of the world, only with no Rosetta Stone to interpret and no one with whom to share any knowledge I gleaned besides. (I’ve long fantasized about a bizarro-world Rosetta Stone, where the people who discover it interpret everything backward—they mistranslate everything but discover a wondrous faith unknown to anyone in history, a serio-comic saga of gods and people engaged in a picaresque narrative full of windmills and episodic striving after a sequence of nothings. And then I remember how close our deck of faiths already is to that.)

Shame is strange—it seems like a solely public phenomenon, as an idea, a sensation that comes from the judgment of others. That, of course, is the power of Big Brother God. As the church marquee spoke to me years ago on a road trip, “Character is who you are in the dark.”
When no one visible is watching, except the god of your mind. Despite living most of my life without that avenging angel, humiliation rubs me most acutely when I’m alone, when I stir the immediacy of watching eyes with the terrible, glorious judgment of my own slow recollection of my mistakes.

I stepped into the hall—sneaked like I was afraid of a burglar in the house—in the striped pajamas Marie had bought me as a Valentine’s Day present, the legs so short that the cuffs grazed my shins. The voices of Adam and Marie sharpened into distinction, into words, as I trod into the living room.

Adam sat on the couch, facing me, hugging Marie, her head tucked into the crib formed from his chest and arm. He looked like me, his nose and eyes poised above her hair, taking in the close embellishment of her rosewater scent. She spoke into his body, something about trying to hold the world together.

Adam’s eyes caught me. Unreadable, unnamable—his lips hid in her shoulder.

She stopped talking and rotated her head to peer at me. Her eyes were red, her cheek indented with the folds of his shirt.

I’d lost her, but I didn’t know yet to what.

“She’s telling me about her mother,” Adam said.

I went back to bed but not to sleep; I escorted Adam to the bus station the next day so he could travel onto the next place to disrupt someone else’s galaxy of daily sorrows. Marie and I went back to our clumsy orbit.

Two weeks later, Spring break. Our apartment had never been neater; Marie had discovered in herself a will to order. She never got angry with me again.
The day before she left to spend her spring break week with her family, she sat me down.

“I’m dropping out of school,” she said. “I’m not coming back.”

“This close to graduation?”

She shrugged, utterly unlike herself.

I asked her what about us.

She smiled, that dagger. “I’ve loved you.”

I’d imagined this kind of moment many times in the years we’d been together, the moment she realized I wasn’t right for her. I’d seen myself overturning furniture and destroying lamps, bookcases, plates, glasses, our television. In my daydreams, which had the palpable quality of memory, she was cruel, so my anger was justified. The discrepancy between those memories and that moment confused me. “Why are you doing this to me?”

She was not doing this to me, she said. Her mother was dying, and if she didn’t live every minute with her she could, she’d live a future of regret and, eventually, a numbness.

“Adam,” I said. “Isn’t it.”

No. He’d offered her no answers, no options. It wasn’t what I thought.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

She told me I didn’t have to.

“What about Joshua Tree?”

She smiled again; she kept her face for poker through the conversation but punctuated moments with that smile. “Go,” she said. “I know you’ll love it.”

“I love you.”

She shook her head. “I know. I’m doing this because—because I only have enough devotion for my mother.”
I told her my plan had been to propose at Joshua Tree. Then I asked her to marry me. I rambled that after we graduated, we could go live with her parents, that I’d learn how to console her.

“Nobody can console me,” she said meekly. “Nobody needs to.”

I asked why she stopped loving me, when.

“I don’t think I’ve made myself clear,” she said, but she didn’t explain further.

So I threw on shoes, packed my backpack with books, headed out. The last thing I said to her, yelled as I marched back through the living room: “Fuck your fucking mother.”

My parents came to see me walk in those ridiculous robes, offered me their woolly consolations about Marie leaving. June set her congrats, as did Adam through her, and oh by the way I should call her, she hadn’t heard from me in a while. Which was true: I’d been monk-quiet after spring break, leaving the apartment for class (sometimes) and groceries, reciting litanies of anger and apology to the absent Marie. She left her sweet-smelling toiletries in the bathroom, and I breathed them in and bathed in them.

After graduation, I went to Joshua Tree alone. I got her plane ticket refunded, the one bright spot. I’d never camped but had a two-person tent, a battery-powered lamp, and a bagful of energy bars, cocktail wieners, imitation sticks of fruit, and an engagement ring.

Faces litter Joshua Tree, even as it’s barren of people. Among its geology and impossibly hardy flora, one could reasonably assume to have left humanity, if not the planet. Nine thousand years of erosion and tectonic revision have left giant rocks balanced in what seem tenuous, poses, and the largest rocks have faces. Human faces—the profile with a giant pock for an eye, a forward protrusion with the vaguest resemblance to a face, or a nearly vertical line suggesting a
mute-but-real mouth. I hiked, my boots quickly studded inside with grit, and the first few times I saw faces they struck me as funny. But they accumulated—stoic, smiling, grimly serious, human in their bare outlines. And by the end of my first hour, I was creeped out, watched, scared like a child in a dark bedroom.

I brought too little water, my shirt and hat soon the repository of my body’s liquids and odor. Joshua Tree gets blazing hot in the summer, beyond hot, relentless.

Before noon, my stomach inflating with nausea, I walked away from one of the packed-dirt paths so I could get lost. After ten minutes, lost among the many unintelligible landmarks, I knelt. I fished the engagement ring, size nine with a little stud of a diamond, from my bag of food. I dug a hole several inches deep with my hand, gritting and mudding the spaces beneath my fingernails. I tossed the ring in and quickly buried all thousand dollars’ worth of my love. Stupidly, stupidly, stupidly. And I headed back toward the path. Only after five minutes, my face sweltering, did I begin to understand fully what an idiot I was. The renegade sands among my leg hair, the fact that only I knew of the ring’s existence and disappearance.

I stopped for a lunch of trail mix, canned wieners, and an energy bar. I’d stumbled into a cove of high rocks that raised a tent of shadow. Already, my back and shoulders sore from my pack, my hair hurting from my hat, I wanted that ring back and wanted to be gone—either spending the summer with my parents or landing somewhere—anywhere—for a job. A suit, a crisp résumé in my hand, the synthetic perfumes of anti-perspirant and a dollop of hair gel wafting along with me. Instead, here I was, a magnet for sand, dizzy and nauseated, leaning against an unknown rock in an unmapped place, alone and lonely. I wanted to die; I was ready to die.
If my life were a galaxy, and I were the sun, my planets had slipped their gravitational orbit; I could offer no livable place. Marie, who had made me hopeful and happy, had left me.

My arms were heavy, my face veiled in sweat and grease. I swigged water, even though it made me more conscious of my nausea. I dug my heels into the dirt and let my body rest deeper against the rock and earth. I thought stupidly, spitefully. Here you go, Adam, my corpse will be your legacy. That’s what you get, Marie—you saved your mother’s life by sacrificing mine.

Mom and Dad, June: parenting evidently isn’t easy. Mourning me means mourning your lives.

And back to Adam, again. In my mind I grabbed his hair, bloodied his nose, exposed him for the sham he was, the killer of relationships, not even smoke and mirrors but just words. Unjust words. No son of God but a son of nothing. I squeezed tufts of dirt in my hands and threw them; the little pranksters settled on my legs and socks.

There is nothing interesting about a man sitting and hating. How much of our lives—not only moments but swathes of time—matters nothing to anyone, not even ourselves. Unless we are visited.

From where I lay, I gazed at a rock that appeared to be a face almost fully turned away—a ridged eye, the far shadow of a nose—set against the sky-bluest sky I’d ever seen. I looked so long, so exhaustedly, that the sky and rock seemed depthless and able to slip their outlines and move against one another, back and forward in space as well, pale orange outlines emerging like steam entrails when I blinked.

Beyond that was the unfathomable, where I wasn’t even a rumor. Eons of gases and explosions and noiseless, lifeless being, a stage without actors being watched and swallowed whole by our human audience. Our cameras and rockets moved closer to infinity, yet they could not hold it all. Nothing could hold it all—not our minds, not even the word universe, even that
accosted by multiverses, new unknowns over the horizon’s brow, waiting to baffle. Even the space we could see took place in a time outside ours, outside hours.

And in the meantime, laundry detergent; grocery lists; poverty; celebrity; the film leftover after a blink. Hats, hate. A whole world wanting to be catalogued, none of it left behind. A muddle; a tangle.

Laying there, my nausea occasionally reiterating its desire, I wished for a god. Why could there not be? A something to hold everything, a set of invisible arms and an endless catalog of our most meaningless sighs? I wanted god so when the world seemed an untenable, structureless thing, I could know the world had a holder, a palm or a mind in which it sat.

And I had what we misleadingly call a moment of clarity: misleading because, though knowledge and wisdom in that moment appear so articulated, so apparent in language and outside it as well, a crispness to my understanding, once the moment is over, that understanding escapes demurely and becomes incommunicable. But in that moment, I saw and heard and understood a wholeness that seemed to be god.

I turned onto my hands and knees; my nausea insisted itself in dry heaves. My throat clotted with sick, and I believed the pain in my throat, the palpable fire, was the engagement ring. I heaved; in the moment of respite, I uttered an audienceless prayer for help, for relief. Please, please, please, a scrim of tears in my eyes. Another heave, another nothing.

Eventually, at relative peace, I rolled onto my back. Then, to borrow a phrase, I took leave of my senses, or my senses took leave of me. And I knew; I understood. Knowing, thinking, believing—these all merged into one. Everything had a place; the universe was and is, a flux controlled by systems I could put my faith in. A yes. Better A, or Better B, no, both—all lenses at all times.
I’m like a mystical fool now trying to explain, trying to know again that state. A peace; Marie’s face as beautiful as it could ever be.

As my senses loped back to work, what they conveyed to my brain, the stimuli racing through my nervous system like metal filings toward a magnet, they became subsumed into my knowing. Yet as my senses returned, that experience began its goodbyes. Of course, I didn’t know then that’s what they were, that however-long moment leaving as so many things had, and continue to do. My skin felt like a burning stick pulled from a fire. Broad, confident hands seemed to cup me. I saw the globe flatten into a map I could read from above.

You can doubt and dismiss; you’ll be joining me as well as a grand intellectual tradition. Scholars speculate that the visions of religious figures—Ezekiel, Joan of Arc, Mohammed, even the Apostle Paul—were the encounter between their senses and their then-undiagnosed epilepsy. Diagnosis, even from a distance, supersedes revelation. After all, it’s a more likely explanation, but in light of what happened to me, or what I set in motion, it’s a much less satisfying one.

If what I write survives generations, people can explain away my description with the mitigating circumstances of my dehydration, my depression, my sun-flooded synapses fleeing for cover. Fair enough; you’ll have most of me on your side. You can even blame my capacity for self-deception, a feature much more human than spiritual. But there are moments.

At some point, I got up and walked—though walked is not the right word; I took steps, but slowly, directionless—and stepped so I was facing the setting sun, blinded and aimless. A silhouette came toward me, and in the mystical ellipsis I’d entered, I thought it was—I don’t know exactly—a god, a messenger, an angel, some being I’d always dismissed. He had stumped wings, a broad body, a narrow head.

“Oh fuck,” I said. “Fuck me.”
Those stumped wings? His camping backpack. The size of his silhouette? He was massive—tall and thick—but humanly so. He asked if I was okay.

I was unable to answer the question, my head bobbing as if trying to erase the space around it.

“I’d say you look like you saw a ghost,” he said, “but you look like you are a ghost.” He took my arm and turned me away from the sun. His body formed itself into space.

Officer, he was hairy. Not only was he tall and bulky, his face had what was, for me, a week’s worth of shadow (he had accumulated it in a day), and eyebrows thick as my middle fingers. His large nose had large, dark pores, little nostrils-in-training, ready to slide down into place if need be.

His voice was unreasonably thin, though, as if words had to travel through a narrow plastic tube before launching forth from his mouth. And he was kind. He offered several times to escort me back to the parking lot and its emergency phone for help, then decided he’d set up camp with me. He liked to get away from the city, he said and camp out under the stars. “Light pollution. Makes us forget the sky.” But he said he didn’t mind sharing the view with me.

And he gave me a bottle of his water. His name, by the way—not that it matters—was Stone Wheeler. “My dad was funny,” he said. “Not funny ha-ha, but. . .”

He tilted his pint bottle of Old Granddad to me; I sipped out of that dire need for camaraderie we reductively call “peer pressure,” and coughed my half-shot down. He shared, too, once the dark cupped the sky, his bong made out of short copper pipes. “You can make the ‘Stoner Wheeler’ joke.” I coughed the smoke out, too.

I’d like to say I never met anyone like him, but that isn’t remotely true. I’d met several people like him, only I’d never had the patience for anyone like him before. And it wasn’t only
that he’d staked my tent when my hands shook or that he’d offered me the communion of his chemicals. I’d had a conversion experience—conversion to what, I didn’t know—and I wanted to test the waters of another person’s skepticism.

And honestly I viewed our run-in as meaningful, as not a coincidence. I didn’t think he was some supernatural being, but I couldn’t unfetter him from the weird power his silhouette had. He seemed, silly as it sounds, like he knew things. Like he had wisdom. Like he would impart things. Like he was an adjunct to the experience I’d had.

I should burn all this.

We leaned against a boulder, a small fire he’d built at our feet. It seemed like a baby fire, but I appreciated its small warmth and his ability to build a fire.

He pointed out constellations. I envied that; the sky is as unreadable to me as braille. At one point, I pointed to a light and asked what it was.

“It’s an airplane,” he said.

I asked where he was from. “Too many places,” he said, and listed a bevy of states, as well as Germany and Okinawa. “Army brat,” he said. “Jack of all places.”

After he emptied his bottle of Old Granddad, he pulled out another. “Christen this,” he said, and disappeared to take a leak.

I unscrewed—I love that clicking sound for some unknown reason—and drank. I thought I heard a snake in the sand, only to realize it was Stone’s relief.

He sat back down and spoke quietly. “It’s weird. I always have the sense I should be silent in the dark. Like I’m violating something if I’m not.” Then he belched and giggled.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”
“No,” he said, and swigged from the bottle I’d handed back to him. “Go ahead,” he said finally. “Shoot.”

“Do you believe in God?” My voice sounded impossibly kiddish.

“Jesus,” he said, “you did get fried out here.” He waited for an explanation. “Maybe you did see a ghost.”

So I told him—I’d gotten dehydrated and probably sun-stroked and had what appeared to be a religious vision but was obviously merely a byproduct of system failure. “But I realized I’ve never had anything like a religious experience, not as an adult.” (Strictly speaking, not true. My first orgasm felt religious. And once, at a summer camp, a Buddhist speaker—in a suit, no less— instructed us to listen until we heard no more, then rang two finger cymbals together. I followed that sound to its end and, like the other hundred-odd people in the audience, emerged baffled.)

“And how would you know, right?”

Right.

So he proceeded to tell me about his own religious experiences. As he talked, he seemed variously to recreate and invent what he told. His stories had richness and texture, but also tells as obvious as winks—petite flourishes and embellishments. But he sucked me in. I think there’s virtue in getting lost in a story—not the willing suspension of disbelief, as if we can knowingly set aside those questions—in forgetting your own life. It’s not escapism; it’s the faith Alice has that everything around her is real. That there is another world, and it is in this one.

When he was finished, he said, “So, that answer your question?”

“Nothing ever does.” I asked if he believed in God, what religion he was.

He called himself a Buddho-Metho-Baptolist-Sutran. “All a big bad mix. None of that prefab yellow cake. On any given day, who knows, right? But there’s always something there.
Whatever it is, I wanna honor it.” He took a long hit—hiss of the lighter, silence, hiss of his exhalation. “So you don’t believe in God?”

I held out my hand. He displayed the pint bottle and wiggled it, the last finger of Old Granddad wobbling. I shook that off; he gave me the bong and his lighter. I took a long hit, able to hold the smoke in for a few seconds like a child cherishing a large blown bubble.

Exhale. “It’s a long story.”

“Most of them are,” he said. “But we aren’t adhering to any time limits here.”

So I told him about Adam. The short version—Adam claimed to be God’s second son, and he’d broken up my relationship with Marie. I had to do a lot of backtracking, but I got across the basic gist: because of Adam, I couldn’t believe in God. But now, after today, I didn’t know.

“That’s what nobody tells you,” he said. “Christians, anyway: Jesus isn’t the light and the way. He gets in the way. You’ve got to cut off all his fingers, cut off all his limbs and hair, cut off his head. His wang,” he whispered, and giggled. “We’ve got to stop thinking of God as some dude. You have to erase this Aaron’s face—”

“Adam’s.”

“See?” he said, louder now, his voice rebounding in the night. “It doesn’t matter. You’ve got to get G-O-D out of the way of God.”

“And I should trust Stone the Stoner in the desert?”

He laughed. “Why not? I’ve done more for you than God. I put up your tent.”

“Hallowed be thy tent,” I said. I was doing better. There was a warmth, an acceptance—there was a God. I believed.
I even felt a peace toward Marie and Adam. I had lost something with her, yes, but we’d had time that couldn’t be taken from me as long as I held it. And I would meet someone new, as by chance I’d met Stone and learned about myself.

We dusted the Old Granddad and the rest of his bud. He stayed up to watch the sky; I went to sleep in my tent. I was greedy for sleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night—Stone hovered over me. I asked what he was doing there, and he told me that I’d been shouting in my sleep and he’d come to check on me. He slipped back out of the tent.

I was unsettled; in retrospect, it reminds me of that scene in *Catcher in the Rye* where Holden awakes to find his teacher above him and assumes the worst. But I wasn’t Holden; I didn’t rush to judgment. Stone left my tent, and I went back to sleep.

I woke up sweat-damp in a verdant green glow, the very essence of Eden. But that was the sun’s morning stretch peering through the green vinyl.

I slunk out; Stone was gone. Only from lines in the dirt could I tell he’d been there at all. His shoe prints—the crisp treads of army boots—went off in five different directions; each path disappeared within fifty feet.

I checked back in my tent for a note, or the empty bottle of Old Granddad. I saw my wallet and keys were still in my backpack, my clothes and food all intact.

It wasn’t until after I’d eaten a utilitarian breakfast bar—I still was queasy from dehydration and the film of alcohol and pot—that I thought to check the inside of my wallet. Everything was gone—the hundred-plus in cash, my driver’s license and student ID and birth-certification card, my movie rental card and my credit and ATM cards, the cards of two doctors, a senior-high photo of Marie with her parents’ number on the back in her round, girly script.
He’d even taken the fortunes I’d kept from fortune cookies—I saved them at Marie’s behest after meals at China Paradise.

All that he’d left in my wallet was a Maryland driver’s license for a chubby, spectacled guy named Stony Wheeler. Not the one I’d spent my evening with. Height: 5’7”. Not my Stone. Weight: 175. Not my Stone.

Odd, though: I didn’t panic. Instead, I imagined abandoning myself. No more Thomas Robert Miller. I would leave, empty of my identity, and become someone new. The idea enthralled me as had my awareness of God the previous day. As I packed my tent and food, I invented names for myself, names as full of possibility and personality as my wallet was empty of my own. A new life, a new self. Ray—down to earth and straightforward; J. K.—brusque and charmingly guarded; Rigo—vaguely foreign and no longer the plain white parody of self and privilege I’d become. And those are the ones I remember. As I walked to my car—at least a three-mile hike in the already-hot morning sun—I said aloud, testing my tone and volume and pitch each time, “Hi, I’m Rigo.” I left my past behind—no Marie, no Adam, no June, no mom and dad. I imagined myself in new clothes, with new friends, a new past to invent and tell. Isn’t that the fantasy of regret? Yet I felt not regret but freedom, each step down the path between yuccas and millennia of geologic patience a step toward joy and invention.

But when I came over the last hill and saw my rental car, a tiny mirror of sunlight in the distance, relief and dread hit me. I was glad the car was still there, but all I had to my name was the two twenties I’d curled and stuffed into the ashtray, and the rental-car contract with my name and my father’s—he’d had to add his name from several states away because I wasn’t twenty-five. I’d need help getting on the plane back home—to my parents’ home, which in that moment I thought of as home. I’d call them to get a replacement ID so I could get on the plane; I’d pay
for gas in the rental car with one of my twenties; I’d buy myself a surprisingly comforting meal in the airport with most of the other twenty. I was more fully myself than I’d ever been.

When I reached the parking lot, asphalt strewn with dust and sand, I looked to the sky, away from the sun, for a blush of God. As naïve as I was for having been taken by Stone, I held my new faith like a private note, folded it into an intimate square, and secreted it away.

I got into the car, which was already bloated with heat. A slip of paper peeked out from the windshield wiper. It was the receipt from the park entrance, three thin inches declaring the four dollars I’d paid to enter. On the other side, in elegant script, were the words, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do. Your pal, S.”
Chapter and Verse: The Lost Apostle Found

Twenty-four—

Adam continued his travels. He said to men and women, “Follow me,” and they did. In one town, he spoke to a group of skeptics. Knowing their doubt, he said, “There is no God,” and they agreed. “But there are things we cannot see,” he said, and they agreed, but with hesitation. They feared the trap he led them to.

“God is merely a name,” he said, “and no presumption or name can make a thing so. We must search, moment to moment, hourly and daily, in our dreams and when the sun disrupts them for the other dreams that comprise our lives.”

And the doubters gladly felt the pull of his snare.

Twenty-five—

During this period, the Lost Apostle voiced his own doubt and would not let it be unmade. So Adam said to him, “Do not rely on me then. Go and seek on your own. Make your own life; discover your own God.”

And the Lost Apostle was disappointed, but he went and sought. He found a wilderness unmarked by man and let the heat of day suffuse his flesh until his mind roamed free, and he was visited by one like a son of man who tempted him with false kindness and confidence. The visitor was a mere image of man, but the Lost Apostle failed to recognize him for what he was. Thus the visitor took all the Lost Apostle owned.

Yet in that loss the Apostle found himself. As the sun rose, he tasted the sweetness of the search, and he rebirthed in himself a faith that doubt could not accost.
Twenty-six—

In another town, Adam healed a woman who mourned for her mother’s sickness.
I graduated college in 1992 and spent the next eight years in the desert, searching for a faith. Stony Wheeler had been, I decided, coincident with my vision, not part of it. I got a degree in Library Science (which isn’t the sweet one) and worked in Arizona as a research librarian at a small Lutheran college. I spent weekends hiking, looking for a recurrence of what happened in Joshua Tree. I drove to the Grand Canyon, to Death Valley, to the Mojave Desert, to Arches, and sometimes I found an exquisite peace in which to hunt for god. Otherwise, I did little. I worked, I read. I dated women who seemed either too conventional or too actively idiosyncratic. Only one relationship lasted more than three months, and that ended not long after she explored my wallet.

We lay in bed, naked and damp and tired, on top of her thin sheets. Forget thread count as a plus; I could practically count the threads.

She’d upturned her purse on our second date—“You can tell all you need to know from the contents of a purse,” she said. Small wallet; no makeup except one lipstick, which she said she only used on bathroom mirrors in bars and restaurants; a pack of post-it notes; pens from several businesses I couldn’t imagine her using—a house painter, a CPA; and a stack of church programs. “I’m not looking for a church or anything,” she said. “I’m doing a study.” I know too many academics.

We were in her bed when she pulled my wallet from the back pocket of my shorts. I asked her, playfully (though I meant it seriously), not to, but she said, “Quid pro quo, mi amor,” and smacked her lips.

She cooed at my driver’s license. “Not too shabby,” she said. “I’ve seen worse.”

“I’ve looked worse.”
She said the name of each card and told me what it said about me, a sort of secular, spiritless Tarot. “An eye appointment,” she said. “You want to see.”

She got to the end, where I kept Stony Wheeler’s license. “Who’s Stony Wheeler?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

She rolled on top of me. “We’re not going anywhere for a while.”

I told her he was my freshman roommate, a really close friend, and that we’d traded our old licenses after he flunked out.

“Cute,” she said. “You’ve got a long-lost boyfriend.” And, of course, she wanted to know more—not that she really thought he was my long-lost boyfriend, but because she’d recognized my essential isolation at once, she wanted to know about this fictional friend who was, nevertheless, as real for her as the sharp edge of the laminated plastic. I told her that he and I had lost touch.

I broke up with her a week later. She didn’t seem all that bothered.

After I’d been at the library for five years, my boss asked me what I thought of my future and offered me a promotion. With that prospect, I realized I’d seen what I could of the place, done what I could with its guarded people and its dry heat. I needed a change and told her I’d think about it. In my apartment that night, I decided: New York. Why? It loomed in my imagination as a city to be in.

I spent the Christmas of 2000 with my parents, my first visit of more than two days since 1994. I arrived three days before Christmas, and I hadn’t been in the door two minutes or even set my bag down in my old bedroom when my mother said, “You just missed Adam Ellison.” It would’ve been the first time since ’92, though he’d been kicking around in my mind, ever the itinerant.
My father was in the bedroom while my mother told me how nice it had been to see Adam, how happy he looked (although he was skinny, with prominent veins and a full beard), how joyous June was to see him. While my mother was talking, my father walked in, then backed out on hearing Adam’s name.

By the end of January, I had a job and a sublet in Manhattan. I’d purged myself of most of my belongings—mainly second or third-hand furniture—and put those few truly valuable things I had in storage. My job was on 14th Street, my sublet on the Upper East Side. I loved the idea of New York—the thrumming center of the world, with cultures mingling at every moment, the noise and history transubstantiated to every inhabitant who breathed the air—but the fact of living in New York proved both less and more than the ideal. I’d been too isolated for too long to travel underground packed in among hundreds every morning, the subway poles greasy and warm; to work in a library with tides of students who left empty bottles, half-empty Styrofoam boxes of fries, purses, wads of paper and tissues and phone numbers and syllabi in their wake like so much sand—and I was responsible for each grain.

One day, in a merciless February cold, I rose out of the subway for home, relieved that the sleet had stopped, to find a crowd at the top of the wet stairs, with barely enough room to scoot around to the sidewalk. My subway exit was bad for space even without a crowd. They were attracted by a speaker—it took me a moment at the fringe of the crowd to see it was Adam. There were dozens already, crammed together not for warmth, but to hear him. He spoke barely audibly, lowering his voice a bit each time the crowd grew so everyone had to listen harder. He stood on something, his head a foot higher than the crowd, and held his arms aloft as if he held in each hand some tiny gem each of us wanted. If a camera were trained upon us from above, we would have looked like filaments sliding toward a magnet, or ants scrabbling to enter their home.
Despite the cold, he wore one long-sleeved layer, neither gloves nor hat, his hair playing like kite strings on the wind, his beard light brown. He spoke of the end of the world.

“Each day,” he said, “is the end of the world. We don’t need men on street corners with cardboard signs and sandwich boards to tell us this. We don’t need one like a son of man surrounded by lights to tell us of the end. We don’t even need me upon this figurative soapbox to say, ‘Each day is the end of the world.’

“But we need the reminder, daily, that we each perish, as does the world. And we need a savior to offer that daily death a resurrection and a people to accept that savior.”

People behind me began shoving to get themselves out of the subway stairs. The crowd had caused a bottleneck, and I was pushed into the leather jacket in front of me, heavy with the smells of leather and onion.

“Let them through,” Adam said. He directed the crowd on the far side from the subway exit to disperse, and the crowd quickly thinned to our side. Such was the immediacy of his power over people. I stepped aside to the concrete wall, fifteen feet from Adam, who hadn’t seemed to notice me. Once the tide of people settled to its usual rush-hour thrum and jostle, Adam stepped down from the wooden crate he’d stood upon. He was flanked by four men. A line of people waited along the concrete wall, going around the corner, but he came to me and hugged me.

“Thomas,” he said. “I knew I’d see you here.” Before I could ask how, he told me he’d talked to my parents.

“But how did you know this was my subway stop?”

He smiled, always knowing and beatific, and said, “Coincidence. Don’t flatter yourself.”
His four disciples—I had already called them that in my head—came over. The one who seemed to lead them, a tall man with a lazy eye that lingered over me, said, “Adam, the line is long.”

Adam glanced at the shivering crowd. He looked overwhelmed, shivering himself. I could see in his beard a tint of red; I wondered where that came from, June having no red hair herself. “I’ll talk to them,” he said.

“Aren’t you cold?” I asked.

He turned to me. “Yes,” he said, translucent snot rimming his nostrils. “But so are they.” He told me to get dinner, then come back once I was done. We would catch up.

So I went to Mae Jangg’s, the Korean place catty-corner from where he spoke. Their food was mostly mediocre, their seats ripped plastic, their décor a half-assed mix of neon Korean amusement park and fifties American diner, but I’d come to love their kim chee in winter. Plus, their wait staff, initially rude, had warmed to me. Living in a city without friends, I relied on them.

I sat by the window and watched Adam. One disciple stood behind him like a bodyguard while the other three worked the crowd, presumably getting names and information. Adam hugged each person, listened for a minute or two, then responded and hugged again. Sometimes he put his bare hands on each side of a person’s neck, the way a mother might to her son. He evoked smiles from everyone he spoke to, though he shifted on his obviously sore feet between each meeting.

I sipped my hot tea and chewed on my chapped lips as I waited for my food—Mae’s kitchen was notoriously slow, though fewer than half the tables were full. Not long after my food arrived, mist wended its way between the buildings outside and onto Adam and his line. I
ordered bi bim bop and kim chee to go for Adam to warm him up. By the time I paid, he had only two more people waiting to speak to him. As he spoke to them, I bundled myself up and gathered my things, including the food for him. I stepped out into the mist and wished I had an umbrella, even though it would have been useless.

Adam hugged the last person as I got across the street, a man younger than us, pale even as the cold splotched him with red; instead of leaving, he hung around. Like the rest of us, he huddled into his jacket and appeared to have no neck. His jacket was thin, a long, waterproof windbreaker glossy with mist.

“So what are you doing now?” he asked as I reached the group.

“Thomas,” Adam said, “this is Simon. Simon, Thomas.”

“Are you a friend of Adam’s?”

I nodded. “Old school.” I handed over the plastic bag to Adam. “I got you some food. Warm you up on a night like this.”

He thanked me as he took the bag, then looked around. Then he handed the bag to Simon.

“You look like you could use this,” he said.

You would think Adam had given Simon a new bicycle. “Wow,” he said, and stuck his face into the bag to smell. “This smells great.”

“Let’s go to where I’m staying,” Adam said. “I’d love to catch up.”

We began walking toward Harlem. The mist on my glasses gave everything a blurry visual echo.

Adam’s disciples walked up front, sequestering Simon from Adam; we walked in back, catching up. Or, rather, he caught me up on what he’d been doing. He had settled, more or less, in New York City, preaching from corner to corner, always garnering a crowd. But churches
never invited him to speak; he had no website or contact information (and wanted none); and he had to fend off potential disciples. This last he said so quiet[y I had to ask him to repeat it, though as soon as I asked I knew I’d heard him right.

After ten blocks of walking, the mist intermittent, the cold intensifying its festival, I said, “How long is the walk?”

“Not far,” Adam said. “We’re almost halfway there.”

“We could take the subway,” I said, loud enough for the disciples to hear.

Everyone walked like monks—heads curled into the chest, hands meeting within pockets at the belly.

“I like the subway,” Adam said. “But it’s not far now. Besides, we don’t have the money for it today.”

I offered to pay, but Adam waved it off, Obi-Wan Kenobi-like.

“Can you do something about the rain then?” My stocking cap was damp on my hair and ears.

Adam looked up to the sky and said, “Hey Dad, cool it on the rain.” He giggled.

What had Adam been doing? He kept on keeping on—touring the country by bus and by thumb, spreading the word of his unadministrated ministry. He accumulated obsessives and searchers as apostles, a disconnected network of friends and apartments, mostly younger people in need of what we foolishly call guidance, people gullible for its mimicry. He healed people of their spiritual troubles and gave them a purpose, a goal of seeking something worth being sought—a thing like that we call God. Adam settled in New York City as a home base, living more or less off the grid, an adjunct to those who paid the bills. He only asked for donations for
those who housed and carried him, never for any church or salvation. According to the discord of
newspaper reports, the first online content hidden among the early internet’s undesigned pages,
and the eye-witness accounts I later gathered, he preached a conflicting message of utter
selflessness and a deep investment in the self. One should give oneself to the needs of others and
even embrace the grand, ultimate anonymity of being one among six billion. We had no afterlife,
and no guarantee of God but in the quest. But at the same time, we should work to raise the
sensitivity of our senses and impulses, a self-awareness of total immersion.

He baptized no one, performed no miracles, much like the strident Jesus of Mark’s
gospel—if you needed a sign of God or miracle, you needed to look elsewhere (where you still
wouldn’t find it), and look and look and look. He spoke in public places, never in churches. He
called for an act of focus between prayer and meditation, said that no one should pray for him or
herself. He called for an abolition of all violence, an embrace of guilt, an open acknowledgment
of sin. Sin was not, he said, some abstraction like envy or gluttony or pride, but a real, extra-
sensory desire provoked by the ways in which we muted our senses. He spoke at times in
tuneless scat, alternatively as enchanting as Ella Fitzgerald and as off-putting as someone
speaking Arabic.

As he denounced the word God, he told his audiences that he was the son of God, as they
all were—son and daughter and father and mother. There was, for his public claims, no
hierarchical family relationship with God but a link for all to discover nonetheless.

Every couple months he returned to New York or Los Angeles, where a growing throng
of loyal followers begged for a church, a meeting place, regular sermons. But like the Christ of
Mark, Adam withdrew for solace. He decided at irregular intervals to share his wealth of
wisdom—though he never called it that—and offer someone the core of his knowing.
It is widely believed—widely being a relative term here—that around 1995 Adam counseled his first follower to suicide. Or perhaps, I should say, a follower first interpreted Adam’s inducement to the effacement of self to its logical end, or a logical end.

He lived in Queens. He was one of Adam’s most faithful, a sometimes homeless twenty-something who lived in deep depression while Adam was gone and swelled into an ecstatic joy when he was in New York. He leapt from a bridge to his death as Adam was in the city. They had spoken in the morning, and that night he leapt. He left behind notes declaring his joy, his happiness, his revelation. He knew that the phrase “born again” in the Gospel of John was a mistranslation, that the phrase also meant—especially in John’s context—“born from the sky.” He would, he claimed, leap and be reborn from the sky so he could reset his mind and body to a new self that could access its own senses more fully, more easily, and exert a real self-control. I’ve read a photocopy of the letter, which is both rational and, as they say, a cry for help.

Adam and his disciples led us to a brick apartment building, one of many jutting from the earth like unknown fingers sticking up through a grate in the pavement. We climbed five flights to the top floor and walked right in the unlocked door. The walls were bare; a single bulb lit each room. Musty, concave seats rested in the corners. There were names and phone numbers written in pencil on the walls. Steady bass music and the syncopation of life outside bled through the walls.

We sipped water in the living room while Sy devoured his Korean food, his face red and his nose runny. I thought it was just us in the apartment until I heard a toilet flush. Into the living room loped a large man in a T-shirt and jeans. Brillo beard, brillo hair, but quick, clear eyes. It
took me a moment—mist-dressed, my glasses dried by streaky, my pants clinging cold to my legs—to realize I’d seen this man almost nine years prior.

“Stone,” I said.

Nobody seemed to hear me, least of all Stone.

“Tag,” Adam said. “This is Thomas. Thomas, Taggart.”

He held out his hand. “A pleasure,” he said, his voice cultured.

I stood and left his hand unanswered. “We’ve met.”

“Oh yes? Where?”

I asked if he’d ever been to Joshua Tree.

“Sure,” he said, and I thought I had him. “I was raised in Twentynine Palms, in California. My father trained Marines. I haven’t been back since I was twelve, though. Did you attend Oasis Elementary?”

No, I told him. Did 1992 ring a bell? No?

No.

“Taggart Swenson,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Adam told me that Tag let him sleep here when Taggart was in New York. Tag traveled, as Adam did, but for work as a labor journalist. “But he does spread the work, so to speak, as much as he can.”

“Oh yeah? You got the gift?”

One of the guys on the couch told me to back off.

Glancing between Adam and Tag, I said, “It’s a thin line between prophet and grifter.”

Except for Sy, the two guys on the sofa stood to cow me; Adam and Tag turned and kept them from me.
“Calm down,” Tag said. “I’ve been called worse.”

“You’ve probably done worse,” I said. I’d imagined this moment—though without Adam and his followers, of course—and I’d even decided that I forgave Stone/Tag, that if I ever saw him I’d show him my forgiveness.

“I’ve done things I’m not proud of,” he said, still facing away from me. “But I’m afraid I don’t know what you think I’ve done to you.”

I was tired with rage. “I guess I’ve got you confused with someone else. You have a brother?”

“Two sisters.”

The apostles calmed; Adam and Tag faced me. From Tag’s face I could tell: he knew me. Before long, Adam, excused everyone else, who left, and eased a too-grateful Sy out the door. Tag disappeared into his room.

“I miss being alone,” Adam said.

I got up to leave, but he stopped me—“I’m very happy to see you again.”

I told him I was glad to see him.

“So what was that about?”

I explained my experience in Joshua Tree, minus my moment of faith and its contrails.

“But Tag’s not Stone. Only an uncanny resemblance.”

“Six billion people in the world. We aren’t all snowflakes. Our eyes deceive us all the time.”

I bristled at his condescension.

“You never had much of a poker face.” He smiled in a way that seemed appropriately self-deprecating. “But I wouldn’t want lectures from me, either. Tell me—how are you?”
I was settled but a little lonely, ready to learn about this new place and meet someone. That I thought in terms of the rest of my life, that thinking about my parents’ relationship—they might as well have spoken only through a sheet, I thought—I wanted something like what they had. That when I thought of June, I feared my future. That I wanted a relationship like what I had with Marie.

Here he stopped me. “I need to ask your help, but first I should explain about Marie.” I tried to protest that he didn’t need to explain, but he kept talking, possibly because of how I’d reacted to Tag. “I never told her to leave you. I did tell her to consider her mother’s illness and to ease it in whatever way she could.”

And what happened? Her mother didn’t last very long. Marie blamed Adam—she got in touch with him somehow and said he’d ruined her mother’s last weeks by forcing Marie to her mother’s side, that she never would have left me if she’d known. When I heard that, I missed her a little less.

“But I still feel guilty,” Adam said.

I told him he shouldn’t. “So what do you need me for?”

For the end.

Something was coming, he told me. He seemed to have reached a kind of critical mass, with believers desiring a goal. “It’s almost like they want Jesus to reappear, but only to redecorate,” he said.

“I don’t blame them.”

“Me either. I sympathize.” He sat forward, perched as if he might leap and fly away.

“Listen. I know you don’t believe in me, or anything else. And I’m not going to ask you to do anything you don’t believe in doing.”
“I don’t even understand what that means.”

He grinned. “Fine. But I need you to be around when I speak here, as much as you can. And I need you to listen. Whenever I say something that sounds false to you, or when any one of the people around me says anything wrong, I need to know.”

“Not a problem,” I said, the old smirk peeking out.

“Most of all, I need your friendship.”

Three evenings a week, I rode the subway to deepest Queens, tourist-free areas of the Bronx, unlistening parts of Staten Island. Any given morning, I’d get a call before I left my apartment, or I could phone one of three numbers from the library, to find out where Adam would be speaking. They’d give me a subway line and a stop. F line, 169th. Yellow, Astoria. Red, Gun Hill. Depending on how far away it was, I’d rise out of the ground either right as he began his sermons or somewhere toward the end. I could tell by the size of his crowd. A dozen people? He’d just begun. Folds of people with little space between them? He’d been talking for fifteen, twenty minutes. He had a miraculous way of making you forget you were one among many; what he said seemed only for you. Sometimes you’d know the crowd was there, but you’d feel a face full of pride that they didn’t understand the way you did, that they missed the true message around which your mind curled its fingers.

Which is not to say I believed. But I was moved. He spoke of our desire for God, for a beginning and end point that held up our lives. Yet religion served not as God’s way of conveying a message, but of our way of neutering God, of anesthetizing It. We had either a Fabergé God, or a brutal haze, or some bipolar anthropomorphized country father, some set, clear outline, not the thing we sought and needed. Unencumber. Disconnect. Drown your senses.
in the search for that nameless thing you wanted to call God, that thing freed from our helix of life. Create a name for that nameless thing, and never tell a soul.

In the meantime, search by filling the needs of others. Bless those who needed blessing. Understand what that means. Give yourself until every atom of your body disperses to others.

After his sermons, he counseled anyone who asked. Most of them had reached such a point of desperation that they asked for relief without hope, without panic, without expectation. Addicts, the sick, the poor, prostitutes, people who worked for less than minimum wage but skipped a shift to listen, the bruised, the aged, the filthy, the lonely.

I missed plenty of Adam’s work. I only saw three nights out of seven a week, and I never saw him during the day. When I asked what he did with his days, he said, “I look for people in need, and I try to help them.”

“You help old ladies across the street? Where do you look?”

He shook his head. “Everywhere, Thomas. Anywhere.” He told me they simply had to be ready.

“You think I’m ready?” I said, needling.

“Always,” he said. “But right now I need some sleep.”

In attending Adam’s sermons, I came to acquaintance with his many apostles, who appeared at regular intervals and outnumbered the Biblically requisite twelve: Alice, Xe, Tag, Marcus, the two Jamies (one male, one female), P, Jay, Louis, Zell, and, among others, me.

In the crowds, there were no regulars, except one—a young woman who looked as if she’d aged too quickly. She had rough blond hair to her shoulders, and her skin looked
desiccated. She kept her bottom lip caged between her teeth; her cheeks undulated as her jaws worked at worries.

As troubled and as tired as she appeared, she became beautiful to me. I admit that, at first, I thought she was Marie. My eyes did this always, replacing the faces of strangers with the impressions of my past. But that’s what sparked my interest in her, the resemblance that soon jarred absurdly—she and Marie couldn’t even be cousins. Seeing how worn she was, I scolded myself for finding her attractive, but after seeing her at four or five of Adam’s sermons, I wanted to know her. However, neither the apostles nor Adam seemed to know who I was talking about, and she left as soon as Adam finished her sermon each time. And she didn’t always show; sometimes I found myself searching for her and got a little down when I couldn’t find her face.

One night—this was midsummer—I stood at the back of the crowd once I spotted her—her bare shoulders in her tank top angular, her spine a warning. Once the sermon was done and the crowd dispersed enough for some to leave, she paced past me, as unaware of me as the weather. I followed, wanting to hail her, but she kept a quick pace, sometimes jogging a few steps. Finally she hurried down the stairs into a subway station. She waited next to a bench, shifting her weight back and forth. A clarinetist played a pitchy version of the national anthem.

I stepped next to the garbage can on the far side of the bench from her. “Excuse me,” I said, once too quiet to be heard, loudly enough a second time.

Her head whipped to face me, but she didn’t say anything. I walked around the bench to her other side; her head kept steady.

“I don’t want to bother you,” I said. “I’m not some creep.”

Her bottom lip eased out from between her teeth. Her eyes lived in two dark burrows, as if each morning a sculptor thumbed in the spaces above and below her eyes.
“I’ve seen you at a lot of the sermons. Adam and I are friends.”

She crossed her arms and gazed away from me. “You here to recruit me?”

I told her no and laughed. “I’ve just noticed you a lot, that’s all.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a creep.”

I asked if she wanted to get a drink with me.

She studied my face, evidently judged me harmless, then said, “Coffee.”

We rode the subway among the close crowd, not even acknowledging each other. When she looked down the car away from me, I spied the part of her hair, jagged like one of those national borders forged by a winding river. After four stops, she got off without signaling to me, obviously aware of how aware I was of her.

It was a swarmed station in where two lines crossed and a lot of people transferred. When I caught up to her on the stairs to the street, I asked, “You live around here?”

“Nope,” she said, popping her lips at the end.

Once we were out of the station, she pointed to a dingy ’50s style coffee shop and led us there. I didn’t know these streets; I was at her mercy in a small way. She slid into a booth by the window as if into a new skin. I offered to buy her something, but she shook her head, and ordered and paid for herself. Once our coffees came, she poured two packets of sugar into her cup, then stirred and stirred and stirred.

“I’m Thomas Miller, by the way.”

“Ray.” I must’ve looked perplexed. “My parents named me Sarah. I have three older sisters—Rebecca, Esther Ruth, and Abigail.”

“Your parents Bible thumpers?”
“More like Bible swingers. They went to the well too many times so I changed mine when I turned eighteen. Legally.”

“How’d they take it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m kind of tired of Ray, though.”

She hunched to her coffee and blew over it. She seemed more interested in it as an object than as a drink. “So you’re friends with this Adam guy.”

I told her how we grew up together as best friends, parted ways, and got back in touch when I moved to New York a few months prior. All the news that’s fit to print.

“You must have a lot of stories.”

I grinned, a first draft of urbanity. “Everybody does.”

We sat quietly a while. Her deep-set eyes shifted focus continually on people walking, cars slowing to the stoplight, bike messengers flashing by. She watched a storyless film of random life, and I watched her eyes, an unreadable film of an unknown story.

She sat back up and eyed my coffee for a change. “So what do you think of him?”

I played close to the vest. “I don’t know. He says a lot of smart stuff, and he seems to help people. I’ve only been back a few months, though. What about you? About Adam or anything else?”

She looked me in the eye again. Maybe I’m simply not comfortable with eye contact, but she had—has—a powerful gaze. “Why are you so interested in me? Why’d you follow me down into the subway?”

I took one of her empty sugar packets and folded it on itself, then did so again and again until I couldn’t anymore. Grains of sugar escaped onto the table. “It’s hard to explain. As a
general rule, I don’t follow people into subway stations. Honestly, at first you reminded me of someone I used to know.”

“Funny,” she said, “I’ve never heard that before.”

“Her name was Marie.” I challenged her look and, even though I was right, I lost. “I’m attracted to you, okay? And I want to know why you keep coming back to listen to Adam. Maybe it wasn’t so hard to explain.” I looked back up at her, forced into my most honorable face.

“Fine,” she said. “But so you know, I’m not on the market. I’m spoken for.” She wiggled her right pinky, which bore a wide, tarnished band. Out of either naïve hope or rare accurate perception, I didn’t believe her.

“That’s fine. I have the same curiosity about Adam’s other regulars.”

“Okay.” She stirred her full coffee once, then told her life story. She spoke in jumbled, interrupted sentences that were more digression than progress, a kind of syntax that required new punctuation. She’d been an addict—cocaine, plus whatever else she could grind into fun powder. But she’d finally gotten herself into rehab after a series of mistakes she wasn’t going to tell me about, and stayed, for almost two months, more or less contentedly clean. Except she hated rehab—the people, the process, the religion and meetings and shunted hopes. “All my life, like in kindergarten forever—I’ve had people try and do things, do things, for me, my whole life, and I just wanted to do it, do for myself.” Short of her second clean month—fifty-nine days, actually—she had the need. She got out of bed after one of her worst nights of sleep ever—“which is for me saying a lot”—looked in the mirror, and knew: she would score some incentive, or die, or both. So she walked around for a few hours until work, where she waitressed. “And I tell you, for that four-hour shift, I was the best waitress in the history of the world. All for those tips.”
She could have scored off one of her co-workers, but she didn’t want anyone of them to score right back off her, body-wise. “Word of advice, not that you need it: never score off white dudes,” she said. “They’re the worst.” After work, she hopped off the subway and went north. Right at the top of the subway stairs was Adam, already sermonizing. His voice slowed her blood; it either quieted her need or fed what fooled it. By the time he finished, she was at peace and knew she could last a few more days. That night, she slept like her angel sisters.

I asked what he talked about. A smile, or a grimace. “I don’t remember.”

“By the way,” she said, “you slurp when you drink your coffee.”

“At least I drink mine.”

“You aren’t paying for it.” She stirred her cup again, as if to keep it awake. “I used to drink like two dozen cups a day, then more after I first got clean. I’m trying out the whole moderation gig.”

“How’s it going so far?”

She raised a teaspoon of coffee to the level of her eyes, then lowered and poured it into the cup. “Okay. Some days are better than others.”

“You’re still clean?”

She pointedly brushed her nose with her index finger. “Thanks to your friend.”

The waitress came by, a pot of coffee in each hand. She looked like an unaware parody of blind lady justice. She eyed Ray’s full cup, then gestured to my empty. “Refill?”

“Decaf.”

Once the waitress stepped away, I said to Ray, “So do you believe in Adam?”

I’d managed to perplex her. “What do you mean?” That returned the favor.
I dribbled cream into my coffee and gently swirled the cup. “How do you—what do you think Adam is? I mean, you said about rehab that you didn’t like the people, and the religion, and. . .”

“The meetings.”

“Right. But what’s going on with Adam? Why does that work for you?”

She seemed to try to figure out what I wanted to hear by reading my face. It was then that I noticed beyond my curiosity a real infatuation.

“He’s a guy who wants to help people, for whatever reason. He wants us to stop and pay attention to everything. But it’s not about him or God or money, it’s about—it’s a religion of people, not some God. No afterlife or father or icons or pews. Every moment, as much as possible, being truly alive.” She squinted at something outside. “I don’t know. I don’t want to sound new-agey. All I know is listening to him makes it easier to be clean.”

I gulped my decaf and pulled a dappled napkin from the dispenser to wipe my mouth.

Then, beneath the table, I worked the napkin into the tightest ball I could and leaned toward her.

“What would you say if I told you he was the son of God?”

The first grin I’d gotten out of her. “I have to admit,” she said. “I didn’t take you for one of those. I thought you weren’t going to proselytize.”

“No no,” I said and leaned back. “I don’t think he’s the son of God. He does.”

Her face became less guarded, her skin detailing how she absorbed this new information.

“He’s never said anything like that.”

“Would you keep listening to him if he had? He said it all the time when we were kids.”

“Bullshit.” I shook my head; that wiped her world-weary knowing away. “The fuck?” she said. “That’s the guy who’s keeping me clean? Some Heaven’s Gate nutter? Why are you telling
me this?” Even though she was upset at the news about Adam, she was angrier at me for revealing it.

“I only want to tell you the truth. I don’t know—I’m not close to anybody here, but there’s something about you.” And I confessed something true: “I used to lie to people a lot. I didn’t really know who I was, but I knew what I wanted to be, and I made that up as I went. But I don’t want to lie to you.”

From her, a mix of sympathy and disgust.

“Maybe Adam’s fucking with me. Either way, if what he says helps you, good.” Her: skeptical, pitying. “I want to see you again,” I said. “I’m not always like this.”

“You know where to find me.”

I asked for a phone number, an address. The former she didn’t have; the latter she wouldn’t give. Not that I blamed her. She asked me to leave first so she could be sure I wasn’t going to follow her. I obliged. I looked back while crossing the street; she gazed back and motioned with her hand, *run along, run along*. She held up the salt shaker as a reminder—don’t look back.

Halfway down the block, I realized: how did she know where the sermons would be? She said she didn’t have a phone, and none of the apostles knew her. So I crept back to the corner across the street from the diner, staying close to the wall and drawing weird looks from passersby. “Nice creep, Elmer Fudd,” a wizened black man said. At the corner, I spied her, one-quarter profile, gazing out at the street and holding her coffee cup in both hands before her mouth. Then she swallowed it all at once and wiped the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand. And she rose and disappeared, only to reappear at the front door.
She glanced both ways; I pressed myself as flat as I could against the wall. Buildings obscured the sun, but its light still cast its hand over her side of the street. She headed left out of the shop, not toward the subway stop we’d come from. I followed on my side of the street, keeping a distance and trying to obscure myself behind pedestrians on my sidewalk. But at the next block, she crossed over to my side, so I slipped into the pawn shop I was next to. The owner, a big white guy behind mesh, glanced at me but didn’t acknowledge me. Yet again I failed to register as a threat. I figured I’d wait a minute for Ray to go wherever she was going, then exit and head on my merry way, but as I gazed out past the guitars hanging in the front window, she crossed the frame of the front window, right to left, keeping her eyes on the ground. I idly fingered the flat strings of an acoustic and forgot to breathe. When the guy behind the counter asked if I was going to buy something, I said, “No thanks,” and went out to find that Ray was gone.

I saw her several more times over the next few weeks. The more I thought about her, the more I liked her and the less I believed her. I stood near her each sermon she attended and tried to talk to her afterward, but she revealed nothing. “You seem nice enough, but I need to run.” I told myself curiosity drove my small obsession.

Because, honestly, she didn’t seem like a recovering addict to me. She was odd and deceptive, but not like the addicts I’d met recovering in the Southwest or the two co-workers at the university library. Something about her story, and about the fact that she showed up without knowing the apostles, needled me. I knew her profile well, the way her hair flanked her ears, the amazing way she stood completely still as she listened to Adam.
The apostles recognized her after I pointed her out to them, but they thought nothing of it. Maybe she knew other devotees, they said. Adam, for his part, knew who she was, too, in his aloof way. “She’s not the only regular,” he said, which subsequently I recognized was true. But she was the only one who left immediately once the sermon was done.

One Thursday night, I attended a sermon, but from a far distance, well out of earshot. I spied Adam from a bar window, incognito in sunglasses and a cap pulled low. After he finished, I followed Ray, keeping a block behind. I followed her into the subway, a New York Post (a paper I’d never buy otherwise) as a wall. Unlike the skittery weird girl who spoke to me, the Ray I tailed seemed keenly focused as I watched from a distance—first behind concrete columns in the station, then from one subway car away.

After a few stops, she transferred to another line in the direction of where we’d had our coffee. In fact, she got off at that stop, and I headed for the far exit to the street but had to turn around when I saw her walk instead to the other line in the station. She kept up that way for almost an hour—riding until she could switch to another line, then heading in another direction. As if she knew she might be followed but didn’t really know I was with her. When I mapped her travels later, I saw how aimless and random they were, even after I took the time to search for patterns—station names, line colors, directions, you name it. I could have filled in shapes, but they would have been my own private constellations.

We finally emerged from underground on opposite corners, the dark sky, its stars erased by the city’s lights, requiring me to switch to my regular glasses. I knew these streets, but it took some moments to realize how I knew them: I had followed her to the neighborhood of Tag’s apartment. Three blocks away, I risked losing her by sprinting in a direction apart from her, a long route around to a distant spot for spying the entrance to Tag’s building. Once I found the
corner, my lungs hot from running, I waited. Had she beaten me there, or had my guess been wrong? At one point, I thrummed when the building’s front door opened, but a curvy Hispanic woman in her forties or fifties emerged in her robe and smoked a cigarette.

    I twice gave myself five more minutes to wait and was on the verge of a third when Ray materialized hugging a paper bag of groceries to her chest. She went up to Taggart’s building and pressed a button; the buzzer buzzed, and she went in. I looped around and set myself back in a dark doorway facing the east side, then counted up five windows to Taggart’s floor. Most of the windows had their lights on; a few flashed television semaphores, but no silhouettes offered clues.

    I waited ten futile minutes, time enough to arrange a relatively neat set of questions: What was her relationship to Adam, or to Taggart? Why collude behind my back? Why hide things from me? Or, if this was coincidence, and she simply lived in Taggart’s building—which could explain how she knew where the sermons were—why did she lie to me? Or were the apostles lying to me, too? Theoretically, they could have never seen her in the building (except Taggart, to whom I hadn’t mentioned her). And why did I want to hold her down and get the truth and kiss her and fuck her recklessly? Or is that last question too easily answered?

    I’d gotten distracted from watching, framing my questions into some order, when in the distance Adam strolled alone to the building. I couldn’t see the front door from my hiding place, but I heard no buzzer—he had a key.

    I renewed my spying prayer to the windows, and Adam answered—his silhouette appeared, masked by the curtain, and stayed still, undefined like some uncertain icon. Was he taunting me?
A few minutes dissolved into the past, he moved from the window, and the room went
dark.

One night, he spoke near the subway stop near my library, so I got to hear the whole talk
and see their preparation, which was nothing more than setting out a box for Adam to stand on.

Afterward, he spoke to individuals for almost two hours. It was summer then, our bodies
like stoked fires. As he and his three apostles looked around for anyone else to help, a dying
woman shuffled to him. She wore gray sweats, slippers held together by masking tape
accessorized with gummed adhesive and lint, and a blond bouffant wig, tilted off kilter so it
showed her bald scalp where bangs would have been and an empty patch over her left ear. Her
face seemed like a poorly constructed mask of clay ready to slip off.

“Please,” she said, her voice a twig. She grabbed Adam’s hand; he flinched at her force.
“I can’t die like this.”

The apostles, the two who had risen to fight me, moved to detach her from Adam. He told
them to let her be, though he looked frightened. I leaned against a newspaper box about five
yards away.

“Tell me what you need,” he said, as he said to everyone who asked for help.

“I live in that apartment.” She pointed to an open window on the third floor of the
building across the street. “I listened to you, and I watched you help all those people. I’m dying.
I’ve got this cancer, here”—she pulled his hand to her throat—“and it’s killing me.”

I realized she held his other hand to keep herself from falling.

“Make it go away, please. No more chemo. No more of this death, please. I’m not
allowed to touch my family. I can’t touch anyone. This illness is a death.”
Adam’s apostles glanced at his hands, layered with the hands of hundreds. But Adam held her eyes up with his.

“Are there tears on my face?” she said. “I feel like I’m crying, but I can’t because I’m so dehydrated.”

“Okay,” Adam said, and hugged her. He held her body up by squeezing it to his. “Next week, when you go to the doctor, tell them your cancer is gone. Ask them to look for it. They will look, and they will discover it’s gone.” He continued holding her for several minutes, pedestrians going by mostly oblivious, until their breathing followed the same rhythm, his stomach pressing the convexity of her sweatshirt to touch the weak flesh beneath.

Finally they parted, and one of the apostles—Xe, a wiry girl born in Shanghai—took the woman’s arm to walk her home. “Don’t go to the doctor early,” Adam said, “and don’t tell anyone. Otherwise, it will not work.”

Xe and the woman were halfway there when a sleep-bleary woman in jeans and a silk blouse, her face marked by the lines of a pillowcase, burst from the building. “Mom!” She ran to Xe and her mother. “Let my mother go!” She had to be calmed by her mother and Xe.

“I wanted air,” the dying woman said. “I got some air.” Xe and the daughter flanked the older woman and helped her in a tableau that, if you weren’t watching, you would barely know was moving.

Adam watched them angle her through the front door, then said, “Say your piece, Thomas.”

“You can’t do that. You can’t pretend to be some fucking faith healer with magical powers.” It was the first objection I’d made in the months since he asked me to listen.
He spoke quietly to me so the other apostles wouldn’t hear. “Thomas, listen to me. There are exceptions. I don’t expect you to understand, but I can’t explain—”

“Of course you can’t explain,” I yelled loud enough make his apostles and pedestrians jump. “You can’t cure cancer, Adam. No matter what you say, you’re no God or son of God or whatever. You’re just some huckster who either thinks he can heal people or wants everybody to think he can.”

He brought his mouth to my ear. “I am the son of God, Thomas. I am.”

I shook my head and stomped off to the subway, my shoulders tense, waiting for one of the apostles to stop me. But none of them did, and I paced among the crowd in the station, shaking my head, violence in my arms as I waited for the wind that precedes the train.

After swearing off Adam, I was aimless when I left work, as if all my friends had moved away or a girlfriend had broken up with me. I took the subway home and half-hoped I’d climb the stairs to my street and find a crowd enraptured. Three nights of that, then a long, lonely weekend. I read a novel; I napped; I microwaved frozen meals and watched sports I had no stake in.

The next Monday, I rode the subway after work. Instead of getting off at my stop, I stayed on the train and continued to a place I’d never been and walked around. Part of me hoped that, by pure—or not-so-pure—coincidence, I’d find Adam in mid-oration. Once he finished his sermon and began his counsel, I’d stand on the other corner and yell about his falsehood and his cynicism.
But when I emerged from the station, it was like any other, so I did what I’d never done at Adam’s sermons in other places I’d never been: I walked around. I saw the neighborhood on its terms.

On Thursday of that week, I left work utterly drained. I hated the students and faculty, my coworkers, the janitors standing by windows so they could get cell-phone reception. I didn’t want to ride the subway; I only wanted to sleep. I, I, I, me, me, me. One of those kinds of days where you’re the least burdened Job in history.

If I hadn’t been waiting to cross the street, I wouldn’t have noticed her, the woman with cancer, beaming as she walked toward me, looking merely a step further from death’s door than she had, perhaps only halfway up death’s front walk. She strode to me; I missed crossing the street as the crowd around me dissipated.

She bucked against the Don’t Walk light, joyfully impatient as traffic sped between us. But what was I to her? I already told myself I didn’t believe she’d been healed.

Nonetheless, she hugged me, hard—my lungs gushed. “I’m alive,” she said. “I’m alive! Where is he? I want to thank him.” She let me go.

“I don’t know where he is,” I said. “We’re not close or anything.” Looking at her, I didn’t want any part of this miracle. She’d come out without her wig, and the few hairs on her head looked like the last strands of seaweed waving to the surface of a dead ocean.

“But you’re one of his best friends. I could tell. You’re a believer—you’re an apostle. His light shines on you.”

“Lady,” I said, “you’ve got the wrong glow.”
“But he cured me. My cancer is gone.” On the word gone her eyelids trembled a little more open, then blinked slowly. They were dry, flaked. Her eyes had a weird, arid intensity, as if she were some Frankenstein imitation of life. “He gave me life.”

“No he didn’t. He didn’t cure anything—he can’t. This has to be medical.”

“It happened like he said it would,” she said.

“No. It was a coincidence. You’re delusional.”

She clutched my hands. Her thumbs entrenched themselves in my palms. She was giddy. “Tell him I want to thank him. In person.” Away she went. Her body toddled, ghostly, her legs bowing under her paltry weight.

My hands throbbed where she’d touched them, even when I got home. I scrubbed them, scalded them, but I kept riling my palms, encouraging the pain as the tongue does with a sore tooth.

I skipped dinner. My hands echoed with her miracle. Though I’d memorized the number, I pulled out the slip of paper I was to call for Adam’s sermons and dialed. Out came the trio of notes signaling a wrong number, followed by the mechanized woman with her odd plural:

“We’re sorry.”

The next night, and again on Saturday, I went to Taggart’s building and rang the buzzer, but no one answered. On the Saturday, I scanned the names. Ray’s was absent, so I buzzed different apartments—there were twelve in all—until I spoke to someone. Ternow, 4A.

“I’m supposed to meet my friend Ray here,” I said, “but I forgot her apartment number.”

The man on the other end said, guarded and gruff, staticky as if his voice were routed through two speakers, not one, said he didn’t know anyone by that name.

“What about Taggart?” I asked.
I thought he’d hung up. “What you want him for? You got a badge?”

So I walked away, fitted with information that could’ve meant too many things.
January 19: To Dust

The following Tuesday was an early day for me—up at 5:30, at the library by 6:30 so I could unlock the front doors at 7:00. Students collected by the front door at 6:50 like autumn leaves on a grate. They were a mix of regulars who, for whatever reason, worked in the library for a couple early hours before heading to class, and students with papers and presentations due that day. These latter were the worst—manic and exhausted, unable to navigate the computer catalog or, often, even to explain the basics of what they needed.

“I have a five-page paper due today for my painting class.”

“What’s it on?”

“I have to pick some movement of twentieth-century art and write about it.”

Didn’t have the assignment sheet, but he knew for certain if he didn’t have his paper done by noon, he’d be toast.

When I saw these students, I pawned them off on the work-study shelvers. They were clever and cruel, inventing whole movements of art to fuck with these lazy, pampered idiots. “You should write a paper about Frodoism,” one said. He went on to describe paintings of golden rings, populated by foreshortened people in apocalyptic settings. Then our work-study student would shepherd the poor fool to the third floor and illustrate, with a slow sweep of his arms, that our collection of books on twentieth-century art was vast. We were, after all, the library for an art college, a school attended largely by brain-dead slackers who hadn’t yet graduated from the vague idea that they wanted to be Artists.
I manned the information desk that Tuesday, building a cardboard case for a century-old monograph on some Polish or Russian painter I’d never heard of, his name (I presume his instead of her) still embossed on the cover and spine but no longer in gold.

After a couple of slow hours, my small store of energy dissipating in the over-warm and over-fluorescent first-floor reference section, I went to the fifth-floor break room. One of the work-studiers was already in there, skipping through flash cards and mouthing right answers. He always took long breaks, but I didn’t mind since he did homework during those periods.

I had to reload the coffee machine to brew me its bitter offering; I’d have barely enough time to load it with cream powder and sugar so I could choke it down and regret the taste until lunch.

The pot was finishing its percolating, wheezing steam from the top, when we heard something like thunder and ran out to see. At the window facing south, we saw a weird smoke in the horizon.

Someone threw the fire alarm. I had duties in an emergency, a clearly defined role. As the youngest salaried librarian—in my thirties—I would coordinate the paths to the emergency exits, man a walkie-talkie through which I could make announcements over the loudspeakers, organize work-study students to scan the floors and restrooms for patrons who hadn’t left.

When the second plane made its distant animal call, so small and so slow, I was outside with the rest of the staff, trying to see disaster in the distance. After the crash, we made our way to a street where we had a full view. The air smelled thick with burning metal, redolent of the time in junior high when a weird tough kid lit things on fire behind the football field—among them a metal coat hanger. The city air now smelled like that, but so fully I could taste it far back
on my tongue. Sirens and human voices competed. I couldn’t think—my senses breathed, each a fully alive ecosystem.

Adam. I needed Adam. That was my only certainty.

I walked north, away from the towers, as many people were doing. I bumped against strangers in the watchers. They gazed and spoke—a plane had hit the Pentagon; a car bomb hit the State Department. Half-a-dozen planes were missing in the skies, waiting to fall. I passed a man speaking some Asian language into a cell phone, and for some reason I was deeply angry and offended. I shook my head; I must talk to Adam.

Every block or so, I’d look back, drawn to the sight—the fires, the plumes, the terrible beauty in the rhythm of the image: two towers goading the sky with their darker clouds.

The great inhuman groan began when I reached the corner of Church and Canal. I turned—I watched the roar, the series of pops, as the first tower devoured itself and set forth its army of dust. Though it resonating in my feet, it seemed a distant thing, until its million footsteps moved our way. People ran toward me; I moved behind the Post Office building, facing Canal, imagining the dust would flow straight past as the people did.

But it was greedy and, as a haze, continued forward and spread to coat me and everything in a thin layer. The dust was on my lips, in my nostrils and eyes. A powder of steel and paper and glass, and people. Innumerable, unidentifiable bodies clung to me and every other surviving witness and the cars and the buildings.

Once I got the dust out of my eyes, I continued north, but this time not merely away from the towers—I was heading to Taggart’s: Adam—as did the people of this world, this dying city, I needed Adam, and the only place I might find him was Taggart’s.
I was three more blocks on when the second tower swallowed itself. Again I watched, rapt, hating my awe at the sheer, evil beauty of that destruction, then hugged by the rushing dust and the wind that followed.

I walked on, my senses still gluttonous. I kept waiting for a third groan and roar, another falling tower to look back to, another powder of lives to swallow me. But I knew there was no third tower to fall—at least not here—and I realized that this would never end. I would wait for another tower to fall, and one day I’d notice I’d stopped waiting.

Lamentations, hugs, rumors. Ten thousand dead, at least, I heard several times. Arguments about how many attacks there’d been in D.C. As I walked, it didn’t seem as if I were getting farther from the scene.

Ray was passing by the front of Taggart’s building, worrying her fingers and her lower lip. I called out her name, grateful to see anyone I knew, but especially her. We ran to each other and hugged, our first physical contact. She brushed my fine powder off her arms and chest. “You were down there?”

Near enough, I told her.

“Did you see Adam?”

I knew the look on her face, a look not particular to her but seemingly universal, that mix of terror and love. It wasn’t even noon.

“So do you live around here?” Even in shock, I kept my lie going.

“No,” she said. She was wandering around, trying to resist heading toward the chaos. So we were equal in that, holding onto our lies.

“You need a shower,” she said. “You want to go back to my apartment? It’s not too far.”
We walked about a mile, slowly, me about a half-step behind, not quite beside her. Finally, we curled around iron bars with flaking paint, down the steps to her basement apartment, a litter of cigarette wrappers and leaves over the round grate in the concrete.

“It’s furnished,” she said in mock agent presentation and slid the key in the door. “You’re not going to show up like every day now, are you?”

I smiled, incongruous as it seemed with the day. “Only when I need a shower.”

Her apartment was dim and chilly, decorated sparely—no photographs, no art on the walls, no tchotchkes. A gray green run under a coffee table no one had ever tried to defend from feet.

I undressed in the bathroom and piled my pants and shirt outside the door; she told me to use her towel. I showered until her water ran cold, even that a pleasure. My legs ached, and my ribs hurt for some reason when I turned. My eyes were a little red-rimmed, but I was clean. Even with the door shut, I heard the certain confidence of a news anchor. I pulled my boxers back on and pinched my sweat-damp socks by the elastic. “Ray?” I called.

But she was gone. My clothes were folded on her couch, relatively clean of dust, and the television was on. But she was gone. Not even in her bedroom—I peeked, but I didn’t snoop.

So I turned on her rabbit-eared television and watched the channel with the clearest coverage. They had a live camera trained on the sky where smoke had replaced towers; a frame within that picture cycled between clips of the towers falling and analysis from experts in various areas—aviation, terrorism, local firefighting and disaster response. The whole thing made me weary and lost, so I stretched out on Ray’s couch, which smelled of must and artificial flowers.
I don’t think I slept long. One of the antennae on her television woke me up. The hinge was old, and the nickel baton swung down, clattering against the plastic set and sending the antenna to the floor. It jolted me awake, and the static wouldn’t let me drift back off.

So I set the antenna back on top of the television and tried to still the extensions, but facing up, they offered a horrible picture on all four channels. I could’ve turned it off and gone outside, but I knew they would offer some news, the possibility of sense and order.

I was holding the right antenna, my fingers somehow conduits for clarity, when the station showed a clip that woke me fully. The shot of a news camera from earlier in the day, trained on the then-intact burning towers. Then one tower began its fall, the viewer turned, and the cameraman held the camera down by his knee and ran. He was in the center of the street, flanked by runners and parked cars. But down the street, the view jouncing toward him, stood a man facing the towers, his arms stretched to the sides. That man was Adam.

The cameraman shouted “Run!” The image shaking toward Adam; running steps and plastic clicks, the roar of a falling building. Someone shouted, “Get down! Get down! Get down!” The cameraman crouched behind a car and trained his camera on the oncoming dust and, fifteen or twenty yards away, Adam. The cloud reached him, pushed him back, and devoured him. The shot went black. Random noises—the roar, a mix as if someone had thrown a bag of garbage down an interminable flight of stairs. Car alarms went off; the cameraman hacked a cough. The black began to resolve to a wall of dust, yet with no life, then into particles further away, scraps of paper floating and trailing after the storm like truant children. Stumbling, confused figures emerged. The news anchor in the studio said, “These are images from earlier in the day.”

When visibility made its clumsy return, Adam’s body was gone.
“Show it again,” I said to the television. “Show it again.”

But they moved on to other clips, other facets of disaster.

I was still holding one antenna, skipping between channels in search for footage of Adam, when Ray shouldered her way through the front door.

“Adam,” I said.

She drew back.

“You left me here alone,” I said.

“I went to find a payphone.” For the first time, she appeared untethered around me, without the upper hand. “What about Adam?”

I shook my head. “You went to Taggart’s.”

Her eyes and mouth went wide; her body notched itself into protective uprightness. She looked as if she was watching towers fall for the first time.

I let the antenna fall. “You went to Taggart’s.” I hit the consonants of his name hard. That was my only ammunition, as angry as I was, and I intended to use it.

She shut the door and leaned back to nudge it into the jamb. The TV static fuzzed, along with the ceiling fan. I shut the TV off.

“I was looking for Adam,” she said.

“I just saw him,” I said and pointed to the dark screen. A jot of energy careened the inch from the glass to my finger.

She shifted from one foot to the other, her hands at her sides. She looked like a cowardly cowboy in a film, about to fall victim to a sure shot. “Is he okay?”
But I was weak, too, injured by what I’d seen. “They showed one of the towers falling, and the—” I didn’t know what to call it, that cloud of human dust. “He stood there waiting for it, and he was gone. The video kept rolling, and when you could see again, he was gone.”

For the first time since I’d known her, she looked like a needy addict—a symphonic rehearsal of tics, eyes wet but sunk deep in their sockets, arms and hands unable to settle in some détente.

I didn’t think Adam was dead; it didn’t occur to me until later that she did.

She came to me, cheeks wet, and hugged me, her head against my chest. When we’d hugged on the street, it was nearly meaningless, simply the gratitude of recognition that the other was alive, that the failed world we knew might go on. But this hug: her arms were tight; she gripped her own wrist, and her knuckles nested in my back. My arms reached around her shoulders, and my thumbs rested on her small, sharp peaks. Her stray hairs tickled my chin and the divot between my nose and lips, but I didn’t move for fear of ending the moment. She spoke hot breath into the concavity at the middle of my chest. “I loved him,” she said. “I love him.”

I’d half-expected news like that; yet still it hurt. So I held her tighter to protect my face from what it might reveal.

“Does he love you?” I asked.

“He might have,” she said. “I’m not sure. Now I’ll never know.”

I had to let go to explain that he’d be all right, that he’d merely disappeared, that he was already helping people recover. I said these banalities with about as much conviction as schoolchildren reciting the Pledge of Allegiance; I barely covered the sick impulse my brain had wished, that Adam was dead.
“You know him better than anyone else,” she said. She turned on the television and manipulated the antenna to get a relatively clear picture, fraught only with the occasional, erratic wink of a static dot. She sat. Tears like sweat fell, her face and body otherwise placid. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

I would.

We spooned, and she told me of her love for Adam. How she’d stolen a kiss from him, how he’d let her hug him and hold his hand, but nothing more.

The next day blurs. Television, newspapers, combing for details and a restoration of order. The only moment that stands out: while watching coverage of makeshift missing-person boards that had been put up, I realized I should call my parents. I imagined them imagining me under rubble, pulverized into dust, my body a disbanded nomadic tribe of cells. I heard them frantically calling hotlines, unsure how close my job or sublet was to the towers. I could be in that still cloud over Manhattan.

Two blocks from Ray’s, I found a working payphone and called collect. My mother answered—yes, she would accept the charges. Her voice hummed with only mild joy. “We had an idea you were okay,” she said.

I wanted to tell her my harrowing story, make her guilty for not being terrorized at my potential loss. But no. “I’m fine,” I said, and went back to Ray’s.

Only a month later I’d learn she had cancer.

Ray needed to run to the grocery, mainly to be around people—her restaurant a few blocks from World Trade was closed, the owner cleaning glass, dust, and debris. “He doesn’t feel right, like he’s throwing away evidence,” Ray said. So I went back to my sublet to shower
and change into clothes not hemmed with grit. There were five messages on the machine—one from some old friends of my subletters calling to make sure they were okay, unaware they were in Italy; three from the subletters themselves, calling to make sure I was okay, as I was a proxy for their apartment—they hoped I hadn’t left any windows open; and one from my father, his panic tamped down by my mother’s reassurances. “We know you’re okay, we just want to hear from you. But we know you’re okay.”

I switched on the news to see what footage they were running. A hole in Pennsylvania, a hole in the Pentagon. I sympathized little; later, I chided myself:

I’d only left the bathroom window open; I vacuumed and wiped, vacuumed and wiped again. The shower curtain I rinsed under the bath faucet. The other windows were tinged gray, with a thin ghost layer on the inside of the sill. I worked open the window in the kitchen; so much dust had pooled in the sill’s grooves, exhaustion pulled me down. I closed the window, then made the bed and called my subletters. It would be evening in Italy.

They informed me they were coming back as soon as they could fly into the United States. I could stay in the guest room until I found a new place within a month. They needed to be, they said, in their city.

I showered, then walked naked through their apartment, which I’d always been too shy to do. No matter how many times they’d told me to make myself at home, no matter how far away they were, I was an intruder.

Showered and dressed, I didn’t feel clean. My eyes itched, and I was a touch congested—not sick, but slowed.
I went to Taggart’s first, my hunch correct—Ray was there. Taggart, Ray, and two apostles who seemed to be hanging out long after the party had ended: dreadlocked Dougan and Xe. Xe’d once had many piercings—the hipster stigmata—and now had the holes to show for it, those open pores. The apostles were watching news coverage; Ray sat on the couch with them, worrying one fang with her thumbnail. Taggart was calling places, looking for Adam.

Ray seemed indifferent to my apartment news; she didn’t even seem surprised that I came in looking for her and Adam. You wouldn’t have known we’d shared a bed until early that morning, then shared a dry breakfast bar on her sofa. I was as anonymous to her as Dougan and Xe or the phone numbers on the walls. But her hair was clean, curling lightly at her neck, and I could smell the raspberry shampoo of hers I’d used the day before.

So I watched the news coverage, mainly interviews with city officials and terrorism experts. Someone said New York City was “open for business.” I was the only one who laughed.

Then Taggart was standing there with a glass of water for Ray. “No word on Adam.” He sent Dougan and Xe out to check two apartments in the Bronx where Adam might be, with friends I didn’t know. After their footsteps stopped rumbling the stairs in the hall, Ray said, “I want to get fucked up.” She held the glass of water out from her body, as if she were holding it for someone else.

Taggart went to the kitchen, rattled a pill bottle, and brought back three white discs. “You need some sleep.”

Without question, Ray took the pills and disappeared into one of the bedrooms. I heard springs yawn and exhale under her body, and I ached.

Taggart sat where she’d been and watched the coverage. It was the first time we’d been alone. “Ray says you saw Adam on TV?” He spoke quietly, but still with crisp diction.
“Yep.”

“She’s not very detail-oriented, so.”

I told him what I’d seen.

“And you’re certain it was Adam?”

“Well,” I said, “apparently I’m not always great with faces.”

He glanced at me, blinked, looked back to the television. “I should apologize for what I did to you in Joshua Tree.”

That took a moment to sink in. (I’ve always liked that phrase, “sink in,” as if the brain is made of sand and silt.) I stood, my ire potent. “I knew it.”

He rose and shushed me.

“You don’t want her to know?” I said, still loud.

“I want her to sleep,” he said. I could see he cared about her as much as I did, maybe more, or in a more composed, less desperate way; that only made me angrier, but he had a point.

I sat back down, and so did he.

“Who are you conning now?” I said.

“Nobody.” His voice shed its dress. “I used to be a shitty guy.”

Taggart was not his real name; it was the last one he’d taken from someone else. Born the son of a petty criminal and raised by an uncle who was a luckier petty criminal, he followed the family’s footsteps. He went from city to city, running short cons and stealing identities, living off borrowed cash or credit cards he’d taken out in the names of others, or cards he’d merely taken. His life was easy, unfettered. But an ulcer of bitterness pained him: He simply hated the people he stole from. Not in a Robin Hood, rob-from-the-rich way, but with loathing. Why weren’t people more careful? Obviously, money mattered to these people, but they seemed so unaware of
its value he could part them easily from it. This went on for years—anger that they couldn’t see through his transparent stories, his grifter’s charm. “It wasn’t like ‘a fool and his money,’ either,” he said. “These people weren’t fools.” And he consoled himself with that fact, that they were some sort of challenge. But you could hear the acid that still roiled him.

“What about me?” I asked.

A grimacing smile. “Sometimes I regretted taking people. You were one.”

“Aww,” I said. “Ain’t that sweet.”

He hadn’t gone to Joshua Tree to rob anyone, he said. He didn’t drink or smoke on cons—even taking the most naïve people, he needed a clear head. And he felt mean-spirited after leaving me—he didn’t use my credit card (which I knew to be true), he gave the cash away to the homeless (which I had no way of verifying). But he kept up his work for two more years, his loathing for his victims—my word, not his—nursing his loathing for himself.

One night in Atlanta, he got other-worldly drunk. He wanted to give himself alcohol poisoning. “Not suicidal, but the way when you’re drunk you decide to show people you can clear a fence or keep a car steady on the wrong side of the road.”

He failed, of course. But through the night and the next morning, the alcohol wanted out, and he had no choice but to oblige. As soon as he could drive, he left the dozens of Peachtree Streets behind. He pointed the car east to I-95. The sunlight was killing him, though, a hysterically bright day as he drove east, and he’d lost his shades during his bender. His eyes kept tearing up. So he decided to pick up a hitchhiker, in case he needed someone to drive. “As a good general rule,” he said, “never pick up a hitcher.”

That hitchhiker was Adam.
Taggart was Taggart then, a young idiot in Jacksonville who’d fallen into money and, thanks to his new friend’s skill, fallen right back out of much of it. Adam was Adam. He didn’t take long to ask Taggart about the state of his soul (though without using the word soul—Adam didn’t believe in them). Once upon a time—in Joshua Tree, in fact—Taggart enjoyed these kinds of conversations about one’s spiritual self, what universe of God or Gods one had chosen to believe in. He’d encountered just about every degree of faith but the most fundamentalist, and he loved to discuss how they orbited each other and how a person chose to ground himself on one faith’s soil.

But not then. Hung over, wet-eyed, his mind an unwound watch, Taggart wanted silence or the regularity of small talk. Nothing that needed an answer or a moment’s thought. So he told Adam to can it or find another ride.

“You’re welcome to drop me off if you want to avoid these questions,” Adam said. Taggart quoted that bit verbatim, then repeated it.

For whatever reason, Adam riled Taggart, but not into pulling the car over. He went on a tirade, loud and incoherent. Taggart had been prone to angry outbursts as a kid, but in school he’d grown a tranquil skin over his temper. In the car, though, there was a force in him unlike anything in years, and as badly as alcohol had wracked his body, he was perversely enjoying yelling, enjoying flailing his arms as he drove, pointing to wet blurs in the landscape to emphasize what he said. But when he was done, he was like a great bellows that had been squeezed empty.

And Adam looked unmoved, utterly stoic. “You’re hollow,” he said, much as someone might say, “It’s partly cloudy.”

Taggart pulled the car over, less out of anger than exhaustion.
“You’re a shape without form,” Adam said.

“Please get out.”

“You choose to deny God’s second son?”

The weirdness struck Taggart. “What’s your name again?”

“Adam Ellison. Yours is?”

Taggart couldn’t remember the name he’d taken, the name he’d already said. He could only recall, out of sequence, an overlapping noise of first and last names, the ones given him in birth as well among them somewhere, detached from all selves. Then, the name that rose from the muck: “I’m Thomas Miller.”

It’s a common enough name, but when Adam said, “I have a good friend with that name,” Taggart sensed himself caught. He shut off the car and got out, walked around to the trunk, shoved by a semi’s draft. He pulled a small leather toiletry bag from its nook inside the spare tire and brought it back to the driver’s seat. Inside the bag, wrapped in a rubber band, were a couple dozen IDs. Taggart thumbed them to the floor mat beneath until he found mine.

I asked, “You kept mine all that time?”

“Some I kept for future use,” he said. “Others I kept for different reasons.”

He got up and went to the room where Ray had gone to sleep. He eased open the door, Ray’s voice and his murmured, and he came back. “Here you go,” he said, and handed my old driver’s license to me.

I looked exactly like myself, but young and naïve. My haircut was so dated; my old address gave me a pleasant shock. “I’m not accepting your apology,” I said.

“I’m not offering one.” He then told me that Adam had saved him, that in their long drive up the interstate, they discussed things he couldn’t repeat. “I owe him my life.”
“So why the fake name?”

He seemed to test varying durations of breath. “Penance,” he said finally. “I’ve basically lost my original name. I have to earn it back.”

“So if I told Adam all this, it wouldn’t come as a surprise?”

Taggart sat up. “Holy shit,” he said and pointed at the screen. The camera showed a concrete room of cots occupied to sleeping or slouched EMTs and firemen. Handing bottles of water to them from a cardboard box, his smile a beatific gift, was a pale gray Adam.

Ray stumbled from the bedroom, her face a gauze of medicated exhaustion. She recognized Adam and sobbed. Taggart hugged her to hold her up.
Chapter and Verse: The Torture of Christ

Twenty-seven—

Amid a crowd angry at war and death and smoke and ash and secrets performed in their names, Adam rose to speak.

“Tell us what to do,” some shouted, “tell us what to say.”

“I tell you to be silent,” he said, “and listen.”

So they did.

Twenty-eight—

So he spoke softly to spur them to silent listening. “I have a story of the man,” he said. “Of the man who leads you to peace and the man who leads your name and nation to war.

“One day, the man of war is captured by people clad in black. He knows them not. They throw a hood over his head and eventually deposit him in a chair in a windowless room, where they bind his hands behind him to the chair he sits in and bind his feet to the floor. For a time—he knows not whether days or weeks or merely hours under the one light of man’s making—they feed him, they wipe the sweat from his face, they quench his thirst. They ensure that the shackles that bind him do not hurt his wrists.

“All this time, they ask him nothing, they tell him nothing. This is the only torture they enact.

Twenty-nine—
“They leave the man in the suit of his role of power but feels that power none. After a
time he cannot measure, the faceless men clad in black bring in a bound, sweaty, bloody man
wearing nothing but a loincloth. A twine of thorny stems binds the man to the table on which he
lies—twine around his wrists and belly, twine around his feet.

“Is that,’ the man of war says, ‘Jesus Christ?’ He knew he should be incredulous, yet he
felt the man’s aura of innocence and purity.

“The masked men acknowledged that he was he.

Thirty—

“The masked men then left them alone—the man of peace and the man of war who, much
of his life, had declared and felt himself loyal to the mythic man of peace. ‘Are you okay?’ the
man of war said.

“The man of peace exhaled a wheeze. There were dark streaks on his biceps—a smeared
oil of some sort—and scabs on his wrists and ankles. His long hair was sweat-stuck to his
forehead and shoulders. A black thread, darker than the red and brown of his beard, strung from
his top lip to his bottom lip, tautened its arc with each exhalation.

“I am not,’ by your understanding of the word, okay,’ the man of peace said. The man of
war was shocked by how quiet and unresonant the man’s voice was against the cinderblock. The
voices of the masked men echoed in that room, and the man of war could taste the chalky cool of
the cinderblock against his teeth.

Thirty-one—
“The two masked men came back in. One stood on the far side of Christ’s table, and one stood behind the man of war, out of his line of sight. The unseen man said, ‘Tell us what you know—why are you going to war?’

“The man of war said nothing. He could sacrifice neither the battle plans nor the rationales for war, even those he had stated publicly, for not only were they secrets, he knew that, in some absolutist ways, they violated his loyalty and declaration to the man of peace. Also, he told himself that he would not negotiate with these men by answering.

“In those first moments of his silence, the masked man he could see took a black strap from behind Christ’s table and, stretching it over Christ’s forehead, wedded Christ’s head, immobile, against the table.

“‘What are you doing?’ the man of war asked.

“‘Tell us what you know,’ the unseen man said.

“The other man tied Christ’s hands and feet more firmly to the table with black straps and raised the table at the feet so Christ’s body declined toward his head.

“‘I can’t tell you,’ the man of war said. ‘Spare him. Whatever you would do to him, do to me.’

“‘No,’ said Christ. ‘No one can displace the suffering of another onto himself.’

Thirty-two—

“Relics of Bible verses, chipped from context, veered in the man of war’s memory. He knew that he should recall a particular one and speak it to himself so he could justify the suffering of Christ. The words John 3:16 emblazoned themselves in his mind, but he could not recall the content.
“So he said nothing, his mind a hive of halved ideas. The masked man behind him tossed a cloth—his mask—to the other. The man stretched the cloth over Christ’s nose and mouth, then raised a pitcher of water over the cloth and poured the water steadily into Christ’s mouth.

“‘Wait!’ the man of war shouted, Christ’s choking billowing in his ears.

“The unseen man placed a hand on the man of war’s shoulder and said, ‘In a moment.’

“The hand felt strangely comfortable, and the man of war winced at the comfort.

“When the glass pitcher was empty, the man held Christ upright so he could cough water out of his nose and mouth. After several choking heaves, the over his face went concave into Christ’s mouth, and the masked man returned him to his decline on the table and poured another pitcher into Christ’s mouth.

“‘Stop it,’ the man of war shouted. ‘I’ll tell you anything.’

“‘In a moment,’ replied the unseen masked man. ‘We will be finished in a moment.’

“The visible masked man sat Christ up and let him vomit out water and bile. The liquid splashing on Christ’s feet reminded the man of war of Mary Magdalene washing Christ’s feet with her hair. He imagined himself doing so for Christ with his paltry hair. *Whoever believes in him shall not perish,* he thought.”
That evening Adam appeared at Taggart’s, in need of a shower and sleep. A few apostles, having seen him on the news or heard of his brief background appearance, had gathered as the day went on. Everyone hugged Adam, and people seemed to knock and enter at five-minute intervals to see the risen—or unfallen—man. Before his shower, he was coated in dust; during his shower, a cough manifested in his chest and alarmed us all; after he shower, he cleared his throat and drank glass after glass of water while people told the stories they’d heard about his actions. He only confirmed what we’d seen of him on screen and added, “I helped people any way I could.”

It occurred to me that, over the past two days, as I’d peeled their secrets away, I’d aligned myself with Taggart and Ray as Adam’s closest confidants. As did Adam, I knew their secrets, but I also knew little of Adam himself. I realized, too, I didn’t know what people thought he was. He’d introduced himself to Taggart as God’s second son, but to whom else? And did people believe that, or did they follow him in spite of his hubris?

Near midnight, with two nameless followers hanging out in the apartment, Adam announced, “Bedtime.” He looked at the four of us arrayed around him—me and Ray, who’d been quietly relieved all evening, happy to watch Adam in the basic motions of life, and the other two. His face offered all the same graciousness. The four of us were equals; that hurt Ray, and me too.

So the four of us left, his hugs with me and Ray a little longer, I thought. On the street, once the other two had gone, I said to Ray, “Do you want me to stay the night?”

“Why?” she said, so I went home to my non-home.
All I wanted was sleep, but I had enough fugitive curiosity about the blinking message light. Most of the time when I’ve had a bad instinct about a waiting message, I was wrong. This time, I was not, though I was still unprepared.

“Hi.” That recognition before recognition itself becomes conscious and verbal. Marie. “This message is for Thomas Miller. It’s Marie. Marie Southern. I got your number from your parents. I saw your old friend Adam—do you remember him? Of course you do, I’m sorry. Anyway, I saw him on the news for a second in the background of all that awful mess, and I wanted to make sure he’s okay, and that you’re okay. It’s been a long time. I still think about you, I mean, of course. So, anyway.” She said her phone number, then repeated it slowly.

I hesitated a moment—it was almost one a.m.—then called. Two rings and into a third; she answered, a quiet “Hello?”

“Marie.” I hadn’t said her name with such pleasure in a long time.

“Thomas,” she said. “It’s late.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No, I’m up with the baby.” On cue, ex nihilo, the baby gaahed for attention. “Shh, shh, shh,” Marie breathed to her baby and to my stupid, stupid heart. “I hope my husband’s still asleep. He’s got an early morning.”

“How old’s your baby?” I meandered through the apartment.

“He’s six months. Eli. Our little gnosh.” She said this last in a cute child’s voice.

“Your first?”

“Oh no,” she said. “I’m an old pro by now. He’s our fourth.”

“Jesus, did you convert to Catholicism?”
She laughed the short puff of a person who doesn’t have time to laugh. She sounded nearly the same, but her voice and laugh had gotten a quarter-octave deeper, weighted by what I assumed were joy and sorrow. “No, Smith and I wanted a big family.”

“Oh. Listen, I was sorry to hear about your mother.” I went into my subletters’ bedroom, where I usually entered only to dust. I lay on their sheetless bed, among the childish thrill of trespass.

“I’m sorry?” she said. “What did you hear about my mom?”

“I heard—Adam told me she passed away right after you moved back.”

She was quiet; plastic clacked in the background—oblivious baby distraction, probably with some toy that mimicked the trappings of adulthood. “Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand Adam?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said. “It’s not like ‘What’s that you say, she’s dead? Oh no, she’s not dead?’”

A terrible silence, made worse by my intrusion on my subletters’ private space full of the relics of their life together. “Well, no, she’s not dead, not unless something’s happened in the past few hours. It was difficult, but she survived. She’s a survivor. I see her every day.”

Why would Adam lie? “Why—I’m sorry. I must’ve misunderstood.”

We wheeled the conversation back to normal chitterchat, summarizing the upheavals and events of our lives in anodyne phrases. At one point, she asked if there was a Mrs. Thomas Miller in my life. This was her concession to meanness, I thought; since I’d called near one, surely I had no partner.
But I told her about Ray. Rather, I lied with a vision of life with Ray. And I said some truths, too. “When I first saw her from a distance,” I said, “I thought she was you. But she doesn’t really look anything like you.”

“She doesn’t have the four kids’ worth of fat, does she?”

Throughout the conversation, I marveled at how different her voice was. Though she sounded essentially the same, the changes resonated, as in how the hitch I’d heard in Billie Holliday’s voice as I listened for the thousandth time to “Come Rain or Come Shine.”

Finally, at nearly two, we slowed the conversation to its stop. “It’s been good catching up with you,” she said. “You sound so much the same.”

After we got off the phone, I imagined her laying the baby in his crib. I imagined my shoulder leaning against the cool doorframe as she draped a blanket on our offspring. I imagined her smiling as she walked toward me, bearing her warmth.

The next day was Saturday. No Taggart, no Ray, no Adam to be found. I tried to keep my anger at Adam simmering, but the drudgery of waiting let it cool. No matter, once I saw Taggart at his door.

“Where’s Adam?”

He let me in, then disappeared into his bathroom. I waited in his living room, as lifeless as Ray’s. Anonymous furniture, a small television. Phone numbers penciled on the walls. If I were Taggart, I’d spend as little time here as possible, too.

I was glancing over the phone numbers, thinking of the vandalized bathroom stalls in the library’s bathrooms, graffitied with rhymes about defecation and outlined dragons and male genitalia with gigantic balls. I pictured myself copying these last on Taggart’s walls when it
occurred to me: the phone numbers. I didn’t need to be at the mercy of whether or not Taggart was home. I rummaged through his kitchen for a junk drawer and, in the last one, found a bank pen and an information sheet about natural gas from his electric bill, and copied all twelve numbers and names before the toilet flushed.

I asked again where Adam was. Taggart looked exhausted; I hadn’t yet seen him that way. Though I was still angry at his revelations, I had a small respect for him. He said he’d never seen anything like Adam. Indefatigable in his work to help people. Listening, counseling, healing deep pains, even those beyond the disasters of the past few days. “I don’t know where he is right now. Probably around the hole.” And the following Tuesday, Adam would give a sermon near Ground Zero, as they were already calling it—an original disaster with a borrowed name.

I asked again, “Where’s Adam, that second son of God who’s such an amazing healer?”

“You know where,” he said. “Follow the smell.”

That I couldn’t do, especially at night. That smell of burnt electricity, that eerie glow of lights mounted to give vision to the hopeless rescuers. I couldn’t move toward that. Instead, I went home and tried for normalcy until Tuesday.

Tuesday morning, I called my number and learned Adam would be speaking at noon, not at five as usual. The library had reopened, and they needed me—the disaster had set everything behind schedule. A return to stressed normalcy seemed the best for everyone, even as we adjusted to this new world of falling towers and killer powdered mail. But I needed to hear and talk to Adam more than I needed to shelve and work the information desk. I phoned in sick, which was truish; like others I knew, I still had a lingering head cold that seemed always on the cusp of becoming full-blown. I left early for the sermon. I’ve always been early, a virtue so
encompassing it became a vice of wasted time. By the time I stood three blocks from the perimeter of the police sawhorses and the crowd, I pretended to observe the area around me to keep myself away a little longer. A fat half-hour waited between me and Adam’s sermon.

Grime coated the buildings. I still wondered, as I would for months, if granules of dirt were specks of life or merely debris of life’s drudgery. My fancy way of saying: dust to dust or merely dust? But I realized my pretenses of standing around made me suspicious. That’s one of the peculiar things about the period right after the towers fell, that mix of sympathy and suspicion everyone in New York held for each other. Stand around looking lost or just looking, and you could be a temple of sorrow or an agent of destruction. We’d let our paranoia slacken, and the disaster returned it too much. So I joined the people at the barrier. The odor nauseated me, then my body adjusted in shallow breaths. I could taste it like a recent meal.

I skirted the crowd to the cross street where I’d been told Adam would speak. There I saw disciples I knew by sight but not name; Adam must’ve marshaled everyone he knew. The assembly measured dozens, both unsuspecting viewers drawn to Ground Zero and followers waiting for their master’s greatest speech yet. You could tell them apart: those waiting for Adam glanced between the corner on which he would speak and the hole; the others gazed into the hole, then up to the buildings around.

At noon, he hadn’t arrived. The crowd waiting for him—at least a hundred—awed me. They seemed so eager to hear, and as angry as I might be at Adam, I had to acknowledge some respect for him. I sidled up to a young guy in skinny jeans and an uneven haircut who looked as if he might be waiting to order a drink at a bar.

“Hey,” I said, “you here for Adam?”

“Yeah,” he said and grinned.
“So what do you think of him? I mean, what exactly do you think he is?”

His grin soured to skepticism. “Why you asking?”

“I’m—I know what I think, but I don’t know what other people think. I’m trying to talk to people, you know?”

He gazed back with the crowd and refused to face me again. “Whatever, narc.”

“Narc? I’m not a narc. How would I be a narc?”

He leaned to the woman next to him, who was in her forties or fifties, her ponytail like a clutch of frayed wires. She stepped stood close to me as if angling for a fight, though her demeanor seemed more or less peaceful. “What is it you want to know about Adam?”

“I’ve known him all my life,” I said. “I know what I think of him, but I’m not sure about other people. I’m curious how other people see him, that’s all.” I was on the verge of rambling to this woman who, I saw, was thin-boned, hunched, and harmless. Physically harmless, anyway.

“And what do you think he is?” she asked.

For that, I didn’t have an answer, so I opted for honesty. “I don’t really know. I think he’s just a man.”

She grabbed my wrist as the woman he’d healed had. “That’s fine,” she said. “Has anyone asked you to believe any different?”

I’d trespassed, but on what?

The applause saved me. When I first heard it, I looked toward the workers searching for bodies and clearing waste away, but they were searching us. The applause grew from the far side of Adam’s crowd until he appeared, when everyone joined in. People who’d come for Ground Zero merged with our group, withholding applause like me, as someone from the front emerged with a box and set it down for Adam to stand on. I was about twenty feet from Adam, several
rows back, even as we compressed to add space for more audience. Already I was sweaty and visited by nausea.

He held out his hands, clearly uncomfortable with the applause and a little proud. Maybe the applause threw him, because the first few minutes of his sermon were awkward and boilerplate. He seemed distracted—he stumbled over his words, he looked down instead of distributing his powerful eye contact. All he offered at first were thin condolences for the attack, the easily palatable sadness we’d heard. I was aware of his crowd coming unmoored from their devotion.

But then—if you were watching closely, you saw Adam transform—he said, “Why did this happen? Not because anyone hates our freedoms, but because God made this happen. Not for what false, self-loving preachers like Falwell call sin. Our God, the one we call God for lack of a better name, needed to beckon our attention. We needed him to beckon our attention to the Dream of Babel.

“Yes, the Dream of Babel. We have been misinformed for so long about that story. According to those who spread the story we know from Genesis, then copied it down, man built up that tower, desiring heaven’s reach. But God was jealous, they wrote, and smacked the tower down. God was jealous? No. The story’s wrong. Like most stories, it provides cover for those who tell it. God did not bring that tower down; we did. All of us. God did not split language into tatters; we did. All of us. The carpenters, the masons, the architects, they had different designs on reaching God, and so they had different designs on God itself, and to accommodate those designs they created their own languages. And thus Babel failed.

“And that’s the real reason God sent Jesus Christ in his stead—not to atone for Eden, but to restore the Dream of Babel. We had forgotten that dream, with our welter of faiths,
humanity’s quiver of homemade Gods. Christ came to unify, to gift a single voice to man. He came to restore that dream for us.

“Yet somehow we forgot it again. That offering reached so many, but as with the tower, the designs of so many led to many private Christs. We misinterpreted the dream. We created new languages simply to understand it, yet we fractured the original image and generated generations of misunderstandings. We gave birth to new deaths.

“So today we can rebuild that Dream. The fall of these buildings was brought about by men of hate, yes, but it was initiated by God. These towers shook and fell by the thunder of God’s voice. And we can try to mimic that thunder with torture and murder and war, or we can hear the language of that voice and fathom its love. I am here to give voice to that Dream.”

A pause. I was sweaty and enervated. I saw why people believed. I nearly believed myself.

Behind our crowd, someone yelled, “Fuck you!”

We turned and hissed. Booing warred. Our crowd had grown enormous, with journalists paying more attention to Adam to the hole. A hand grabbed my arm and pulled me to the edge of the crowd: Taggart. I asked what he was doing.

“You want to talk to Adam,” he yelled so I could hear. I looked back to where Adam stood; the crowd had shifted its attention from him to protecting him. He stepped down and disappeared. Taggart and I slipped from the pack, a block of buildings between us and Adam.

We caught up with him three blocks away, the people dispersing toward us in the distance. “That went well,” Adam said. His smile edged toward guile.

Taggart hailed a cab and shuttled me and Adam inside. I held the door open and asked Taggart where we were going.
“I’m not,” he said. “You want to talk to him, here’s your chance.”

Adam told the driver to take us to the bus station.

“You’re leaving town?”

“Always leave them wanting more,” he said. “Besides, I’m not safe.”

I didn’t disagree. Even some of his followers looked angry, though many of us were red, soaking and shining and nauseated.

“I’m going to visit my mother. She’s been awfully worried since she first saw me on the news.”

“I don’t blame her.”

We had to speak over the noise of open windows.

“I reassured her over the phone, but she didn’t sound reassured.”

I could’ve passed judgment on him for how he’d essentially left June behind, but I didn’t want to get sidetracked. I hadn’t seen Ray in the crowd—though I could’ve missed her—and so thought of Marie, even as he swayed me.

“I spoke to Marie the other night.”

He gazed out his window and said something buried by the wind.

“Speak up.”

He couldn’t look at me. Was this a first? “I’m sorry I lied. I didn’t think you were ready to hear the truth.”

“What the fuck? I’m thirty-one.” My age rang hollow to me. “It’s been nine years? I loved her, but I was never that hung up about it. You thought I wouldn’t find out?”

“Sometimes,” he said, seeming to read the cab driver’s certificate behind the Plexiglas, “I think I need you to be angry at me.”
“Good fucking job,” I said. And, of course, I was, but I was also hung up about Marie, as I claimed not to be. The ache of losing her had been covered, not salved. “Why would you need that?”

Now he looked at me. “Because I can make anyone believe in me. I know I have that power. But not you. And I need that challenge. If it’s too easy to make everyone believe, what’s the point?”

That made me angrier, but language couldn’t shape it. I wasn’t merely some clay he could mold and manipulate. I was as autonomous as anyone. Instead of that, though, I said, “Fuck you. You arrogant asshole.”

The last few minutes of the drive were in silence. I noted the driver eyeing us in his rearview. He didn’t want to break up a fight.

At the station, Adam pulled from his pocket a folded wad of cash. He paid and generously tipped the driver, then laid three twenties on the seat. “Go wherever you’d like,” he said. Even he couldn’t hide his disdain. “Anything you want me to tell your parents?”

I fingered the cash, three crisp bills. I had nothing to say to him or them. I didn’t want him voicing any sentiments of mine. He pressed the door shut. I told the driver Ray’s address. As we pulled away, Adam called, “You weren’t ready to hear the truth.”

Which truth, I didn’t know.

Ray was packing a suitcase. “Didn’t I say not to come knocking at my door all the time?”

“Where are you going?”

“Moving out. Moving on.” Her suitcase had room for another layer or two of clothes, but she flipped the lid closed and zipped it shut.
“Why? Where are you going?”

She looked as bad as she had when she’d thought Adam was dead. “I’m moving in with Tag. Adam’s skipping town.”

“Were you there this morning?”

She shook her head. “I refused to go. Adam thinks we can’t work.” She’d threatened to get wasted, to leap off the wagon. Tag offered her a room, rent-free.

“Why’d he do that?”

“I guess he’s a good person. I don’t care, though. When Adam comes back, he can’t avoid me.” She kept squeezing her fingers one by one to pop them, but they were long silent.

“I love you,” I said. It wasn’t true, not exactly. But it seemed like it might arrest the conversation and bring her back to some senses.

“You want this place? The rent’s cheap, New-York speaking.” She was too dazed by her emotions for Adam—more potent and dangerous than love—to offer any energy or surprise for what I might say or do.
January 21: The News Today, Oh Boy

Back in New York, I learned of Adam’s suicides. On the street, I ran into one of his many adherents. I knew his face vaguely. He was young and eager, with small ears and a manic rat-a-tat speaking style. Perce was his name. It was late in the day, the fall chill peeking around city corners finally. Perce wanted to get coffee, to talk about Adam. Normally I avoid conversations with strangers, but with Adam still gone, I wanted information. I still needed to know what others thought of him, and the way Perce repeated Adam’s name, I knew he’d be willing to talk. So we went to a dim coffee shop where scruffy guys looked thoughtful as they posed with their Kierkegaard.

“I’m not some crank believer,” he said. “I’ve always been super-skeptical of religion and all that fundamentalist mumbo-jumbo. But what I saw Adam do. Adam’s something I’ve never seen. He’s a rock star.”

Perce had met Adam on September 10, and they’d had breakfast the next morning. They split during the initial chaos, but right before the towers disintegrated, Perce saw Adam looking up at the columns of smoke. He called Adam’s name several times but got no response. Finally he followed Adam’s gaze and saw a tiny man leap from a high floor. “He didn’t even register as a human being at first, I was so far away. But then—and this’ll sound completely whacked, but I’ll swear on anything to it—the guy stopped falling. Nobody else noticed it, but the guy stopped falling. He was still up there, the sky all smoky behind him, and he glowed. It was like—you know how on a sunny day the sun kind of radiates through venetian blinds? That’s how he glowed, man. And then he fell.” Perce leaned across the table to me and lowered his voice for the first time. “Adam did that.”
He leaned back and was silent. His shoulders, which had been hunched every one of the few minutes I’d known him, eased. His breath and face became models of stillness and peace.

I asked what he thought Adam was.

He looked into his empty cup; his fingers resumed their search for meaning. His hair was messy, but I could see the pale gleam where his part had once been. “He’s some kind of healer. Like what people think Jesus was, maybe.” He made eye contact with me, his pupils poning back and forth. “I’ve heard he’s the son of God, or whatever. I’ve never believed that kind of stuff, but him.” He shook his head. “Him.”

I’ve always been a snap-judgmental person, and Perce was one kind I’d always instinctively ignored. But at that moment, his faith so compelled me I gripped it like a buoy. I believed in his faith more than I believed in Adam.

His mania slipped back into his body as he told me other things he’d heard about Adam: that he gave peace to people before they committed suicide. He’d heard about a homeless man in Cleveland—“he was super manic-depressive like me”—who took his life happily after talking to Adam. “An end is coming,” Perce said. “Adam understands it.”

Like a drug, Perce’s faith wore off by morning. I had no craving for it, either, especially once Taggart called me at the library, which he’d never done before. A work-study kid answered, and when he handed me the receiver, he said, “I thought you said no personal calls.”

Adam was back. He’d be giving a talk that evening in Queens. I asked Taggart if I’d have a chance to talk to Adam; he said he had no idea.

I saw familiar faces on the subway, clumps of people as chattering leaves on a branch. Up the stairs, out of the station, into the people. Enormous, lively, like dozens of cocktail parties
merged into one. From my vantage, I couldn’t tell what was the front and what the back; I couldn’t see where Adam might stand. Through a hedge of heads, Perce caught my eye and nodded. He turned to speak to someone, who then looked at me, smiled, and waved. I waved back, though I had no idea who I was waving to.

The evening was cool as the sun shied away. A shushing quiet dopplered its way toward me. Then, in the distance, putting me on the crowd’s far arc, Adam’s head and shoulders rose. He held a microphone and spoke.

“I am here in the shadow of ash,” he said, “to tell you of the end of the world. Because if you so desire, you can know the end. You can understand it, and if you choose, you can hasten it. We live in a world of constant beginnings we cannot hear and of endings we occasionally register but fail to recognize for what they are. For every day is an ending; every life a death. Nothing less, and nothing more.

“Our routines, our habits, our terror at the events of this fall, those are our attempts to delay the end, our failures to recognize the language of the end. You must understand that every moment is the end of the world. Somewhere in this world, it comes to an end. Your inhalation precedes its exhalation. Life is death.

“That word you pray to, God, is a named thing that can have no end. Thus it is false. For everything has a beginning and an ending, even that which you call God. For you must find and name and voice that thing, give it birth, inter yourself with it. Every dying day, every dying moment. When we say ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we hear that small word, ‘to,’ in there, and we assume it represents a space, a human space between one eternity of ash and another. But that’s wrong; we are ash, we are dust still.
“To be utterly human, to find the thing you call God, you must acknowledge that you are nothing more than dust, that you are at an end. That you are dying and dead. And once you realize you are dead, you can truly search. Once your end is peace, the peace of dust and ash, you may search.

“Not with these wars and rumors of wars, which do nothing but replace the real end with artificial ends, with lies and damage and torture and murder. Not real deaths, not real endings, but with lies to put off the death we always face.”

He seemed to fix his eyes the rear of his audience, at me. That was part of his power, that his eyes could draw in bodies like arms. Cool as the night was, I was warm in the grip of the crowd. As horrified as I was by what he was saying, I was rapt. He had called for death.

“Let us pray,” he said. Rows of heads bowed before me, except for one small head, smaller than a thumbnail from my vantage, in the first row. It was Ray. Had he been looking so deep into the crowd to avoid facing her?

“There is no God,” he said, beginning his prayer. “There is no name for that thing we perceive, that presence within and outside the self. There are as many Gods as men and women, as many beginnings and ends as we can conjure, and more. Allow us to accept ourselves as dust; allow us to accept ourselves in peace.”

He disappeared into the crowd. I headed for the subway, and Taggart’s.

Had I made it to Taggart’s, though, I wouldn’t have seen Adam. When I changed lines, I spotted Adam waiting on the opposite platform, alone. I called out his name.

For a moment he didn’t seem to recognize me. He looked pale, even considering how sickly the station lights made people seem. “Did you come?”

“Yes,” I said. “It was brutal.”
He looked pleased.

One of the trains bellowed in the distance. “Did you heal my mother?”

He seemed hesitant to answer. The train’s noise became louder. “No.”

I yelled, “Why not?” I yelled it again. The train’s wind clutched the cuffs of my pants to my ankles.

“She didn’t ask me to.”

The subway, that miracle of modernity, erupted into the station before his platform. I yelled as loudly as I could, again and again until the train eased back out of the station, “She didn’t know she could.”

Adam didn’t make the paper, but he began to exist on the internet. Websites repeated, with variations, the claims he’d made. We were dust, the end was near, accept that death is life. I read these at work, appearing to all an assiduous researcher. So many of the websites had dark backgrounds and white text, leaving my eyes and head aching, fencing my reading time. Adam had left town right after the sermon in Queens, so these websites were all I had of him. I looked for accidental answers to my mother’s illness. What did her end mean, if anything? Why hadn’t he healed her? Did I have to consider her dead cells little ends? These questions marred my days and nights. I found myself falling out of conversations at work, resorting to automatic nods and mm-hmms to every question. I bought my first cell phone so my father could call me at a moment’s notice, only to discover it didn’t have coverage in most of the library.

The worst part of impending death is the impending. There were moments it wouldn’t have been wrong to say I wanted my mother to die. She wasn’t going to get any better, and my
quiet, anxious suffering reminded me hers would be much worse. When I did speak to her, she sounded like herself, only as if someone were holding the receiver away from her face. In fact, those phone calls were the best conversations I ever had with my parents. No talk was small; even the question, “So how are you,” came so loaded that I could only answer honestly. Both my parents recounted stories from their lives together, things I’d never heard: the week my mother backed out of their engagement, the vows my father wrote for the wedding, the first moment—cleaning up after dinner at her parents’ house—that she knew my father was the man for her. Only that suffering brought out the best in them. Or if not the best, then a lost love.

But most of those nights were waiting for a ring that didn’t come. Then one night, the last night before Christmas break, when I would fly down to stay with my parents, there was a knock on my door. My skin quavered; I was doodling on a notepad. This was before my mystery visitor, but now this knock echoes his. Through the fishbowl peephole, though: Ray.

I opened the door; her knit hat and pea coat were dotted with sleet.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Did you leave something here?”

She asked if she could come in, then did. She peeled off her hat, coat, and boots, and set them on the edge of the kitchen floor. She wore a nappy gray wool sweater that ballooned on her, and her hair reached to her shoulders. She seemed schoolgirlish, reluctant.

I stood several arms’ lengths away. “What brings you by the old place?”

“Taggart said you might know if Adam’s coming back.”

Why would Taggart think I might know? “I don’t know. He seems like he’d go out on more of a bang.”

“No,” she said. “I mean for good.”

“I’m guessing not.”
Her shoulders sunk in, and she shook her head. Her skin was blotchy. She cried, and I still wanted her. “Come hold me,” she said, frustrated by how tentative I was.

We made love that night, or love’s awkward cousin. Afterward, though I expected we’d both be awake, we rolled apart and fell asleep. Sometime during the night, we both rose, the room strange with the lights still on at night. I brushed my teeth.

“Can I stay?”

I nodded.

“I miss this place. I didn’t think I would.”

I turned off the overhead and tumbled back into into the cocoon the mattress made of us.

“Good to know,” I said.

She eased her back against me. I was uncomfortably warm, but I knew the room’s cool would find me again soon. Tired as my body was, my mind had roused. Around three, and in the morning I had to pack. Still, Ray was here with me. Even with the weirdness of the evening, that meant something. Warm and naked, her. Asleep, as much at peace as I’d ever known her.

Or I thought she was asleep. “I’m sorry,” she said. She must’ve thought I didn’t hear her or was asleep myself, because she said it again.

“What for?”

She scootched away from me and turned onto her back. A nice cool air touched my damp torso. “I like you. I really do. I don’t want you to think I came to fuck you because Adam’s gone.”

“I didn’t think that,” I said. There was a long, insincere pause. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure why you came to fuck me.”
“See? That’s my problem. I always like lots of guys, but I know I’m not supposed to. So I get into these stupid situations.”

“Hey,” I said. “This isn’t a stupid situation.” I rubbed her shoulder with my thumb. It felt nice to try and soothe someone.

“I do like you. I know it didn’t seem like it at first. I mean, I didn’t like you. I don’t like when strangers come up to me. I have to pick them.”

I lay on my back; my shoulder hurt from being on my side. “Duly noted.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that anymore.” She rolled to face me, and the bed smushed us together. One of her fleshy breasts with its hairy nipples was on my arm, and I wanted to fuck her again. I wanted to get past the weird delicate way I was around her. “You should know though” she said. “I am in love with Adam.”

“Then what are you doing here with me?”

Her breath against my shoulder was hot and girlish. “Like I said, I don’t like only one guy at a time. Besides, if he doesn’t want me.”

Before I even began packing in the morning, my father called to say my mother had died in the night.
Thirty-three—

“‘Now,’ said the unseen man. ‘What do you have to say?’

“The man of war told the reasons they had stated publicly, the causes and noble abstractions so absent from this room of terror and torture.

“Without inflection, the unseen man said, ‘We have heard you say this before, and we know it is not the truth.’

“The visible man again poured water down the Anointed’s throat, yelling as he did so: ‘Walk on this water! Part this water! Where is your magic now?’

“When they were finished, emptying the pitcher and allowing Christ to vomit water, the man of war confessed his many motivations, some private and some shared only with his circle of intimates: hate, security, the need to show strength, the desire he felt at night to make recompense for the suffering of him and others. ‘Oil,’ he said, ‘money, the fruits of the earth. The roar of a vengeful crowd that has received its justice.’

Thirty-four—

“‘You disappoint.’ The visible masked man took out from behind the table a small handheld device with a thick extension cord plugged into its end. He pressed the device into the genitals of Christ, whose torso thrashed. ‘He doesn’t need them anyway,’ said the unseen man.

“After a few shocks, the two men hung Christ from shackles on the wall opposite the man of war. Christ’s arms were drawn upward in a V. To prevent his shoulder sockets from ripping, he had to balance by stretching his feet to the ground and touching his toes to the concrete floor.
“Even as he saw the suffering, the man of war felt strangely comforted by the familiarity of the image, even as Christ had to work to keep his balance. *This is okay,* the man of war said to himself. *This is right.* ‘Blessed are they who are persecuted,’ he said to the masked men, ‘for righteousness’s sake.’

“The masked men ignored him and left. Time passed. The man of war tried not to stare at the man of peace, who balanced subsumed by his pain and thoughts. So the man of war spoke:

‘Our Father, who art in
Heaven, hallowed be
thy name. From Kingdom Come,
thy will be done, on earth
as it is in Heaven. Give us
this day our daily bread. Lead us not
into temptation, for thine is
the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever
and ever. Amen.’

“He marveled at the hollow sound of his own voice, how split and unfinished it sounded, a board useless for building.

Thirty-five—

“The masked man entered again. They unshackled the man of war from his chair and offered him a bed in its place. ‘I will not sleep while he suffers,’ he said, and they left.
“But soon he slept in his chair, a sleep shaped by the breath of he who could not sleep. The pose they had put Christ in restricts the lungs and forces the body to work harder simply to breathe, and the breath of Christ became its own vocal language, to which the man of war had to listen. For even in sleep the mind turns to the sensations of the body—man seeks to know God through the material, that which is not God.

“But that sleep was not restful. For the man of peace could not suffer silently. And after he knew his unrestful sleep, the man of war awoke to the door scraping its arc along the floor. One masked man entered and, oblivious to the man of war—indeed, he seemed unaware that the man of war could attack—unscrewed the single light bulb to cast the room into the pale light from the hallway, a light that reminded the man of war of nights when, as a child, he stayed awake to listen to his parents discuss the matters of the world. Always be as a child, he thought.”
January 21: Good News

What a lie funerals are. My father, for some reason he could no longer remember by the
time of the funeral, wanted an open casket. Head and body filled with straw, her friends eyeing
your sorrow.

Everyone seemed more struck by her death than me. Ray teared up. On the flight I had a
moment of terror that I could no longer keep the plane in the air, until I realized I had nothing to
do with it. I was more scared than I had my first flight, back to see my mother upon her
diagnosis, after the hijackings.

My father picked me up, and when we got to the house, all the lights were on and Grieg’s
Peer Gynt suite was playing.

“It’s too quiet in here without her,” he said.

I told him he probably had cheerier music in the house.

“Not a whole lot,” he said. He didn’t realize I was joking.

Did I know he would kill himself once I left? Only in retrospect.

My mother’s death had wiped away the subject that gave our conversations verve, so we
walked on cat’s feet and engaged in small talk. I could only ask about tasks that needed to be
done—grocery shopping, calling the funeral parlor or relatives or the newspaper for the
obituary—but he’d taken care of them. She’d helped him make a list. And June had been a great
help to both of them the last few months.

He shut off the music while I was there, presumably because it wasn’t so quiet with
another body in it. I asked only one serious question, if my mother had been in pain at the end.
“Yes,” he said. “Of course.”

It was as if I’d asked whether or not he’d combed his hair that morning.

I’d expected a chaotic house, but it was as neat as ever, if clearly older. It seemed like June’s place used to seem, as if it were a body and time had wrapped its arms around the waist and never let go.

We got home from the funeral sweaty. My father had cried during the service and as they interred her in the earth, but when we walked in the front door, he said, “Would you like a sandwich? I’m going to have one.” I suppose a normalcy had to begin sometime.

I asked if he’d like to talk. He thought about it for a while as he pulled his tie out of his collar, damp like mine, then said, “Not really. Not right now.”

I changed out of the suit and dropped it into my suitcase. When I came back downstairs—I was surprisingly hungry and decided to make myself a sandwich, too—June stood in our living room with Adam. She had been at the funeral, and moments ago he had arrived at her door. I hadn’t seen him like this since childhood: dressed up, almost cowed by his mother’s presence the way children asked to wear nice clothes are.

He rushed forward to give me a hug, and in that moment the first full realization of my mother’s death crashed into me. I wept into him as Ray had into me. Only later, after I’d recovered from crying and eaten dinner, could I articulate anything again.

Adam and I were sitting on my parents’—now my father’s—back patio, carpeted with leaves. I looked out into what had once been woods but now was a line of privacy fences bordered by an asphalt path.
I nursed a Maker’s Mark from my father’s small collection of booze, long left over from a party. The screws of the lid were gummy, but the whisky was still good and warming.

“You could have saved her,” I said.

Adam sipped green tea. My mother loved green tea but apparently stopped drinking it the last few months. My father seemed cheered when Adam accepted his offer of a cup. “Then you believe in me now.”

“I believe that thing you pulled,” I said. “I saw that woman after she was healed. She was the giddiest person I’ve ever seen.”

“There was a guru in India. This was a couple of decades ago. Doctors visited him because they’d heard about this feat of his. He meditated and focused so completely that he created a growth in his forearm. A little lump of benign tumor. They confirmed that’s what it was. And then he meditated and focused again, and within a day, the growth was gone, as if it had never existed.”

“So you’re being modest.”

“No.” He slurped his tea. The slurping messiah. “I healed her. But it wouldn’t have taken without her faith.”

I was shaking my head involuntarily. “So you’re saying my mother didn’t believe, so you didn’t bother to heal her?”

“She didn’t ask, Thomas. I spent a lot of time with her—”

“I heard you were here a few days.”

“Nonetheless,” he said. “I was with her for most of my time here, and we talked about a lot of things. She had regrets like everyone, things she wanted to do, but she was ready. She never asked for my help.”
“You know anyone who can vouch for that?”

“I’m not a liar.” He sounded hurt.

“Marie and I would beg to differ.”

That silenced him. Bullfrogs covered the distance with their croaks. A chilly breeze loosed leaves from the patio. “I’m sorry about that.”

I waited. “That’s it? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Yes.”

That was maddening but right. Why should he continue with some eloquent rhetorical game of remorse? Remorse, like too many emotions, only became less meaningful in language’s ghost notes.

“I imagine your father would vouch for me,” he said. “That she was ready.”

He had, in fact, intimated that during breakfast that morning. “I wanted her to be here longer,” my father said into the phone, “but it was time.”

“You can’t know what’s in another person’s mind,” I said to Adam.

“No one can. We can hardly know what’s in our own minds.”

That sounded like a rebuke, so I decided not to tell Adam about the visit I’d had from the man who claimed to be his father. But after I flew home, I decided, I would tell June.

I took the last nip of Maker’s. “By the way, Taggart finally fessed up about Joshua Tree.”

He laughed. “I know you’re upset, but you’re reaching.”

“Reaching for what?”

“You want to make me angry.”

“No,” I said.

“Fine,” he said. “Tell me about Taggart.”
So I told him what Taggart had told me—his life as a thief and con-artist, his hung over revelation in the car with Adam, his revelation to Adam of what he’d done to me.

When I finished, he studied me. “You’re not lying. You’re telling the truth.”

“But we can hardly know what’s in our own minds, right?”

He looked into the distance, more rattled than I’d ever seen him.

“He made it up?” I asked.

“Ray’s staying with him,” he said, and suddenly he had a coughing fit that sounded like a series of wretched axes angling into trees. I sat up and leaned to put my hand on his back, but he waved me off. He coughed for about a minute, then spat a mix of dark green phlegm and blood.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he said. “It’s just a little cough.”

I told him that wasn’t a little cough, that he needed to see a doctor.

He took his final sip of green tea. “It’s not a big deal.” I tried to persuade him, but he interrupted me. “I need you to take care of Ray. I’ve got bigger things going on.” He looked me in the eye, his face red and a wet film on his bottom lip. “Whatever’s going on between you two is between you two. But I need you to protect her.”

I asked what he was going to do about Taggart.

Adam cleared his throat, or tried to. He spat again. “If I have a chance, I’ll talk to him. Honestly? I trust him. Other than the bit about you, everything he told you is what happened.”

I suspected, but couldn’t tell, that Adam was lying.

The last thing he said: “Please don’t tell anyone I’m sick.”
Waiting for my flight to LaGuardia, I learned there’d been a shooting in New York City. Two men had walked between traffic-jammed cars at seven-thirty that morning, about twenty paces apart, raised their guns, and fired at each other. One died instantly, bullet to the brain. The dead man’s aim, however, was way off. His bullet went through the rear windshield of a Honda, clipped the ear of a passenger, exited the front windshield, and lodged in the rear taillight of another car. I tried to read and ignore the news while passengers around me used the word terrorist.

I was heading for baggage claim when I saw the updated story. The dead shooter was Perce.

At home, I switched on the television. I only had local channels, though, and football and bad movies from the eighties were on. So I went to the library, open for its window of Sunday hours, and learned from the first news site I went to that Adam Ellison, the spiritual leader of Perce and Maxwell Farrell, the other shooter, was wanted for questioning. I called June, and she knew the news. Adam had left that morning.

Taggart didn’t answer his phone; most of the numbers I had written down had been disconnected. No one answered his door when I knocked, either. But when I got back home, Ray was on my couch, flipping through my copy of Crime and Punishment.

“Do you write in all your books like this?”

I told her I’d taken notes for a class. “How did you get in here?”

“Turns out I still had a key.”

Under the guise of unpacking, I checked the box of notebooks and journals in my closet. It seemed undisturbed.
“I didn’t go through your stuff. I just got here. I need a place to stay.”

“You heard?”

“Taggart’s gone. He said he wouldn’t even stay in the city. I didn’t think he’d be such a coward.”

You’d be amazed, I told her, at the things people aren’t capable of.

We were quiet together for a while on the couch. “Do you think Adam told those guys to do that?” Ray asked.

In some ways, she probably knew Adam better than I, but in this case I knew better.

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not.” But my skepticism of Adam won out. “Of course, it’s not exactly an impossible conclusion of what he preaches.”

She looked disgusted. “I don’t listen when he preaches.” She sucked in her bottom lip and sent it back out again, moist. I couldn’t help but think of Adam’s sick wet lip from the previous night. “You haven’t said if I can stay here,” she said. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“I don’t want you to sleep on the couch.”

We leaned in and kissed, but it had no spark. I thought of Adam coughing, wondered if Adam and Ray had kissed, imagined them kissing but interrupted by his violent cough. I pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What isn’t?” I wanted to tell her Adam was sick, but I wanted her attention away from him more. Protect her, I recalled him saying, and wasn’t one way to protect her to keep her from that information? After all, he’d told me to tell no one. “It’s weird, how I know you love Adam. And everything else.”
“Well, he doesn’t want to be with me, and honestly, I don’t think I have the courage to try and be with him. So I’m with you.”

That didn’t convince me. She seemed so mercenary. Her eyeliner was thick; motes of foundation freckled her face. I’d come to think of her as having nervous tics, her face constantly under the revision of a sculptor’s hands, but she stared steadily at me, her blinks metronomic.

I was ready to challenge her when she sighed away. “That didn’t come out right.” She took my fingers and toyed with them. “I like you a lot, I do. And I know that I’m weird to deal with, and I understand if you’re not comfortable. I shouldn’t blame you.” Here she looked at me again. “But please don’t send me out there. I can’t end up lost again.”

God, I wanted her. I wanted to make her love me, not Adam. I wanted her to be honest and strong. And I had her, but not the way I wanted. So I kissed her briefly, then held her.

We lived together for five days, two strange animals housed in the same cage, our intimacies foisted on each other. I’d be anxious coming home from work—I put in days between Christmas and New Year’s to add time off—hungry but with uncertainty deep in my insides. And there she’d be, watching the news on the couch, listening for word of Adam. Or there she wouldn’t be—I’d close the door quietly, first leaning against it as one might against a wall at a dance, then pushing back on my heels to force it shut. I’d call her name, then peer into the two other rooms—kitchen, bedroom—to find her gone. So she’s out, I’d tell myself. But within minutes, I’d worry she was gone for good and check my things, valuable only to me.

And, of course, right as I’d search my pantry for items to cobble together into a meal, she’d come through the door, holding a bag of groceries with some green frond blooming out of the top. She could cook, better than I at least, and I’d watch in the kitchen while she went
clean a mean toilet, too.”

We watched the news for the brief updates that authorities still sought Adam Ellison for
questioning; that the other shooter had been arraigned and refused counsel, citing the counsel of
his Teacher; that coalition forces were stabilizing the Afghan cities after wild successes against
the Taliban. But Osama bin Laden went unfound.

I considered myself functionally pacifist, but I was taken aback at the rage I held for the
Taliban and al-Qaeda, my pleasure at seeing the ground erupt into a cloud of dust from bunker
busters. I let myself ignore the likelihood of civilian death; after all, they were worlds away, even
the alphabetical entry into their language a locked gate.

Ray kept most of her clothes in her suitcase but housed some in my drawers and closet.
We gave each other privacy when one of us showered and changed even though within days
we’d been naked together enough to erase that boundary, and I had an electric joy at finding her
underwear next to mine.

We rarely ventured out, shaken by Taggart’s disappearance and our separation from any
of Adam’s followers. I searched crowds on my way to and from work but saw no one familiar.
One night after work, I went to the building of the woman whom Adam had cured of her cancer,
only to learn she and her daughter had moved. Ray and I even celebrated New Year’s Eve in the
apartment, watching Dick Clark with a bottle of cheap champagne and fearing—me fearing,
anyway—a Times Square explosion. We kissed unromantically at midnight.

She was my first New Year’s kiss—in a relationship, anyway—since Marie. In fact,
living with Ray seemed like a faulty retelling of living with Marie. I kept thinking of the life I
could’ve had—children, joy, relative trust. Instead, I shared a tiny apartment with a woman I may have loved but who didn’t love me, who seemed a fragile risk.

On New Year’s Day, claustrophobic, we decided to head out into the cold. We bundled up. I was lacing up my waterproof boots when the phone rang. It was June; the prospect of news about Adam excited me, and my greeting to her was absurdly joyous. She had bad news; my father was found dead that morning. I asked how he’d died; she said she didn’t know. Only later would I learn she couldn’t bear to tell me.

Whereas I’d been emotionally numb when my mother died until I saw Adam in my parents’—father’s—house, when my father died I mourned immediately. Ray had to make my flight reservation; she had to call me a cab; she had to pull my suit out of my suitcase and fold it neatly back in. I managed myself to the airport and onto the plane. The woman who sat next to me set her thriller in her lap and chatted me up.

“Coming or going?” She wore pearls; even her wrinkles seemed artfully in place.

“Going. Going, going, gone.”

Her eyebrows arched as her lips pursed, a look of interest. “Where to?”

“My father’s funeral,” I said.

“Oh my,” she said, “I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t want to bawl, so I told an elaborate story of my father’s life and death, except it was a hybrid. My father had been Taggart’s con-man parent, absentee for much of my childhood and sweet when he was around. He persuaded with presents, a mix of what I’d been interested in the previous time he saw me and the generic interests of a young boy: books of bug stickers, a baseball mitt, a chemistry set like the one my mother had gotten me, a basketball goal though we
lived in an apartment and I had to share it with neighborhood boys who bullied me. And after my mother died, cursing his name to the end, he became an abusive presence, trying but failing to apologize and drinking himself free from the restraint that held back his anger.

Unprompted, I told her of the cons he’d run and the money he’d stolen: Taggart’s stories and what I’d imagined as well. She checked her watch, flipped the pages of her book, gave me the most emotionless look. My fiction had taken her to a truth she didn’t want to visit. Halfway through the flight, I said, “It’s actually kind of a relief that he’s dead.” That story was done.

Honestly, my real father’s death was a kind of relief, or I thought so at the time. I think every sorrow offers some small pleasure, even if that pleasure suffocates from the weight of suffering. That’s the worst of pain, that it’s never complete.

The police told me my father had ended his life with a heavy mix of anti-depressants, pain killers, and sleeping pills. They had all been prescribed to my mother; the police surmised that she’d probably never taken even one dose, as the prescriptions had never been refilled and my father had ingested such an incredible amount. June had discovered the body and the empty bottles. Several minutes later it occurred to me that she’d lied about the cause for utterly forgivable reasons I still begrudged her for.

I thought the only thing wrong about my parents’ house was the fact that the police had been all over it. Something tugged at me beyond that though. I’d call it a sixth sense, but more likely it was my five senses sending small signals that failed to accumulate, and the cacophony aggravated me. It wasn’t until I went over to June’s house—it was dinner time, and I was hungry with no energy to eat—when I realized. She opened the door and gave me the saddest smile I’ve ever seen on her, which says a lot. I stepped in and knew. “Adam’s here,” I said.
I don’t know how I knew, but I understood instantly: he’d stayed with my father to hide from the police until my father’s death, at which point, with the police giving up on June’s house, he moved back into June’s.

I asked where he was; he appeared behind her. I brushed past June and charged him. He did the only appropriate thing: he moved aside and let me run myself into the hall floor behind him. I righted myself and approached, more slowly this time. June stood between us.

“Mom,” he said. “Please let him do what he thinks he has to do.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, and stepped aside. I don’t know who she was apologizing to, me or him.

I shoved him against the shut door, swung an awkward punch to his cheek, got him on the floor and started to strangle him. Then I let go and punched him in the nose. The blood of the lamb on the lam emerged. I got off and accused him of killing my father, of killing my mother, of being a false idol fashioned in some grave image of death. I sputtered.

June denied it all; he denied nothing, at least in those moments. He let me improvise his ledger of crimes. He sat up and bled on himself, an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing.

Some series of events happened to put us at my parents’ dining table. He still bled, an unbloomed red petal from his right nostril to his chin. He was telling me he didn’t kill my father. He was insisting I drink the glass of water he’d put in front of me, so I did, tributaries dripping to my shirt. The taste, earthy and metallic, brought me back to the present. My shirt held tight to my chest where the water had trickled. The house kitchen smelled of my father—toast and sweat.

“What your father did,” Adam said, “he chose to do on his own.”

I lauded Adam’s incredible streak of suicidal followers.
“So you judge my by the conclusions of others? You too?” He sounded congested; the
blood had clotted. I wanted to unclot it.

“I’m adding it to my running tally.”

He scooted his chair closer to the table and leaned forward. “Listen. I need you to do me
a favor.”

I told him the only thing I wanted to do for him was kill him.

“In that case,” he said, “I have good news.”
January 22: Cruciform

Adam is dead. I’m as responsible as if I’d kept my thumbs against his throat and pressed until he went limp. I’ve met dozens of people who attest their healing faith to Adam, and despite that, I fulfilled the favor he asked.

Yet to his followers, I’m Judas, the purely hated murderer who sold his soul for coin. Not even for that—for no reason at all, they think. For jealousy; for riches no one knows about; for hate. Did I hate the freedom he gave them? Perhaps, but they should understand I was slave to him, slave to the favor he asked. I only did one thing beyond his request.

Adam did not ask me to kill him; he asked me to ready him for killing. Rather, to ready the scene. To trigger the events. He would return to New York City for one more sermon. I would call his apostles—he gave me new phone numbers, even one for Taggart—and they would spread the word. The Last Event, I should call it. Print out flyers, he said, and ask the apostles to do so, too. He gave me a list of places to post them. He told me to use his name.

I asked why I’d do all that for him, why I’d bring legions more to the death he’d brought my father.

He told me to listen until he was finished. Call the police, he said, to make sure they’d be there. Call any authorities I wanted, any who might be interested to talk to the man they wanted to question. “Those idiots,” he said. “Percy and Maxwell. You know I never told them to do what they did, never even suggested it. They always had these ideas, and every time I talked them down. Every time. I thought they’d learned. But they were lost, violent souls.”
I believed him. For his congregation of faults, he’d never ask for murder or that kind of suicide. Of course, in the scheme of things (though there no such scheme of things) I considered what they’d done only a little worse than what Adam had done to me, to my parents. After all, Perce’s stray bullet only nicked an ear.

Adam had further instructions. Introduce him to the crowd. Point him out, and when the furor rose after his sermon, I would lead him to the police. The crowd, reckless as they are and eager to protect Adam, would take care of the rest. “I see the sequence so clearly,” he said. “I see it in my dreams. The people are like an endless series of waving fingers, and I am in their palm. An officer comes near, and they close on me like a fist. A bullet goes into my chest, and it is done.”

He cried, but his cough interrupted him. His cough was fervent; he stood from the dining table to let it wrack him.

Once the cough abated, I said, “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I have to,” he said, and I expected him to claim his divine lineage, avow his faith in himself, swear to the power he had to give. Instead, he said, “If they see me sick like this, I’m no good to them.”

That was it. The veil had fallen. He had as good as announced that they followed him for perception, not any acknowledgement of what was real. He’d hinted he was a flimsy fiction, a stone image plagued with cracks.

So I asked: “Adam, who’s your father? Really?”

He smiled, that smile I hadn’t seen in so long. It ate my flesh. “Don’t you know? Rumor has it you met him.”

“You sent him.”
He shook his head. “Taggart told me about it. Said you were both pretty freaked out.”

“So who is it? Who’s your father?”

“You’ve known since we were kids.”

At some point, before I left, he told me about Taggart. “He’s been preaching in my name and raising money.” When I asked what the money was for, Adam said, looking defeated, “to reach people.” But Taggart didn’t know that Adam knew about his lie, and I was to keep it that way. Adam, it seemed, had hope for Taggart, that the Last Event would sway Taggart to who he truly was, which Adam believed was good.

Adam and June helped me clear out my parents’ house. June’s memories pestered me—my father wore such-and-such a shirt like clockwork on Mondays, like the time that—while my lack of memories attached to my parents’ lives provided an empty chamber in which her words echoed. I told her she could take what she wanted; other than their books, I didn’t want any of my parents’ objects. My mother’s jewelry still formed a nest of wires and beads in the top drawer of her dresser; my father’s thin t-shirts and handkerchiefs stood in a neat pile that smelled of cedar. He had done all his laundry, cleaned the house, neatened the rooms, before he went into his sleep.

My father’s filing cabinets held student exams, drafts of papers he’d published and submitted (all in language almost biblically arcane), and other impersonal records of a life outside my interests. His computer files, too, seemed a record of numbers and experiments and technical terms as abstracted and detached from my life as possible. The paper files I boxed; the university might want them. The computer files I needlessly saved.
We went room by room, boxing kitchenware to give away, wrapping photographs in newspaper so I could pack them in storage, unplugging phones and wiping baseboards and puzzling over tchotchkes. I’d decided to give all this life away. I’d lost my parents only to discover I’d hardly had any part of them at all.

Every time I looked at Adam, I thought, _Murderer_, and I wanted to kill him there and then. I think he knew that; it’s why he stayed even longer than June to help me clear out the accrual of two finished lives. We worked in the sickly glow of overhead bulbs—we’d packed all the lamps—when I asked him, “Why me? Why not Taggart, or one of your giddy followers who’d do anything for you?”

“You’re the only one I trust,” he said. “You’re the only one who’ll follow through.”

I am not Thomas Miller. Thomas is dead. I’m a fraud, a con man, an amalgam of failed Christs. Adam was the real one, sure from birth of his role. Even if it was a lie, he played it all his life through. I am worse than Taggart, who could be honest at least to himself.

My flight back to New York left after dark. I couldn’t sleep, even with the cabin lights down. For the first time, instead of thinking the wills of all the passengers kept us in the air, I watched out the window and thought _crash_ through much of the flight. We hovered past lights—box buildings, streetlights demarcating neighborhoods, and dark spaces of untrod land. The lights seemed like fat stars, humanity’s way of signaling back to heaven or the heavens, Here We Are.

And for what?
Ray met me at the airport. I was walking with the other passengers past security, my eyes down at the floor’s record of thousands of footsteps, and when I glanced up, I was recoiled when I saw her. She’d been trying to catch my eye for some moments, and she smiled one of the first genuine smiles I’d seen on her. Why me? And why not me? I was tired to begin with, and now I was revulsed at being Adam’s second, yet again. An alternate, a discard, a consolation prize of no consolation at all. And when I orchestrated Adam’s death, she’d be utterly without him and wouldn’t want me at all.

“‘I missed you,” she said, and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, hunching me, and kissed me long and soft, as two lovers might after a long separation in a film. Which made me distrust her.

We rode home in a taxi—I had cash culled from my father’s wallet, my mother’s pocketbook, and June’s generosity. She seemed to understand I didn’t want to talk, but she held my hand in her lap.

When we got in, I went to the bathroom to be alone. She knocked at one point, cracked open the door and peeked in, a new violation of privacy. I sat on the toilet, head on fist, a depressing parody of Rodin’s Thinker. She smiled. “‘You okay?’”

I told her I needed a few minutes. What I needed was lifetimes. But when I would get them, I didn’t know. Never, probably.

Ray wanted to hang out with me, but I told her I had phone calls to make. It was after midnight, but the sooner I made these calls, the sooner the end plotted itself. So I called all eleven numbers, told them about Adam’s event and what he needed them to do. I woke no one. Taggart was last. He picked up the phone but didn’t say a thing.

“‘Taggart?”
“Adam said you’d call.”

I gave him the instructions, spare, quick, without commentary.

When I’d finished, he said, “Anything else?”

“What are you going to do with the money?”

Adam had made it explicitly clear I shouldn’t even hint to Taggart I knew about his role, or that Adam knew of his deception. His end was silent; Ray pretended to keep reading Crime and Punishment while looking stunned. So she knew.

I said his name again, and he finally spoke. “I’m not running a con.”

I laughed. “Your whole life is a con, Tag.”

Very quietly, he said, “The name is a penance.”

“ Convenient shield, too.”

He exhaled into the phone. “Anything else?”

“It’s not a con,” he said and hung up.

Since I told the first person I called about Adam’s Last Event, Ray had been hiding her sadness. Now she tried to hide how much she knew about what I’d been saying to Taggart.

“What was that about?”

“What do you know about Taggart?” I asked. “Are you helping him run his con?”

She asked what con. I told her I knew. Knew what? The truth, I said. The truth about Taggart and Adam.

“Taggart introduced me to Adam. What the hell? All I know is he saw me watching Adam and brought us together.” She stood and paced to the bedroom door. As an afterthought, she said, “That’s more than you or anybody else has ever done for me.”
“When I mentioned money, you knew what I was talking about. You looked guilty. I know that look.” Honestly, I didn’t recognize guilt on her face from having seen it before; instead, I recognized it because I’d never seen it and knew instantly what it was.

“That wasn’t guilt,” she said. “You accused Taggart of something weird, and it shocked me.”

“But you knew what money I was talking about.”

“Of course I did. Adam’s told me everything there is to know about what people do for him.”

“Did he tell you Taggart’s a con man?” By this time, my voice wasn’t angry so much as sneering. I’d gained a facility with condescension I’m not proud of.

“Was a con man,” she said. “Was a con man. He’s changed.”

“How do you know that?”

She looked chastened. Head bowed, feet together, hands clasped. “Because Adam says so. I have faith in Adam.”

There it was. The faith I couldn’t argue with or deny. My status as Adam’s understudy in her heart. I could detail for her conversations, contradictions, the evidence of what Taggart had done to me in Joshua Tree, but none of it would matter. If Adam spoke for Taggart, then Taggart was unassailable.

“He believes in you, too,” she said. “Adam has faith in you.”

Now I was stunned. For all the support Adam had shown me, for all he’d asked of me, his faith in me never registered until I heard it voiced by her. “Why?”

“He says you’re good.” She leaned against the open door, softening from my accusations. “I’m inclined to believe him.”
“Do you know what he wants me to do for him? Do you know what he’s done to me?”

She begged me to reconsider. If Adam was sick, he could see a doctor. If he didn’t want to see a doctor, he could take some time off, let it heal on its own. She had not, as it turned out, taken seriously his hints at martyrdom. She told me to disobey his orders, to make him reconsider. She told me Adam hadn’t done anything to my father, that he must’ve made the decision on his own to take his life. I told her there was no persuading me and no persuading Adam. So she packed her bag and left. I can’t say I blame her.

Tomorrow, Adam dies.
My father wrote me a letter and mailed it the day he died. I received and read it over a week later.

Dear Tommy,

I’m guessing all fathers have this in common: an accounting of their parental failures as robust as their sons’. This is my long-winded way of saying I’m sorry for all my shortcomings, real and imagined. And you should also know: I love you. I’m proud of you. Those phrases are beyond cliché, but I’ve said them too few times.

I hope you’ll forgive me not only this letter, but what it hopes to justify. No doubt by now you’ve returned home for my funeral, and you’re coping—another word too small for what it describes—with whatever complex responses my death will bring you/has brought you. (Since I’ll be gone by the time you read this, I’m struggling with the verb tense.)

To continue to live is suffering; to die is gain. That’s what I’ve learned. As your mother faded from the cancer, I told her with increasing frequency that I loved her. I thought it might be a balm for her. After she died—and once the house was empty—I shouted my love to the walls, to her belongings I couldn’t bear to go through. If not for June Ellison, I wouldn’t have known your mother kept the letters I wrote her when I was away at graduate school and she was here. I was a romantic once.

And your mother blessed me: so many things deep in her closet were covered in dust, but that box was not.
Of course, that blessing’s a double-edged sword. Does it mean she loved me always, or does it mean she wished I were still the one who wrote those letters? No matter—I’ve come to understand I was part of a love, and no amount of doubt or dust can erase that.

Ultimately, that’s why I’m writing. You must know: you are part of that love, your mother and I loved you—and still love you—beyond expression.

But you’re wondering, no doubt, why I will kill—killed—myself if I need to tell you and show you how much I love you. I’ll try to explain. I’ve had a life; with your mother dead, I have nothing more to live. Not nothing more to live for, but nothing more to live. The moment your mother died, I felt nothing. I was watching her eyelids flutter, the only active part of her body left. My back hurt from sleeping in those hospital chairs. Her heart, with that stupid beeping machine, slowed, then became a single long tone, and the nurses brought their useless action to your mother’s body. I’d been mourning your mother so long, I actually said to the nurses, “Why are you doing that?”

I did the necessary paperwork, made the necessary phone calls, then went home. I was tired, but not tired enough to go to bed though it was well after midnight. I went from room to room, hoping to feel something like sadness, something more than the mourning I’d felt for months. Let me tell you, it gets pretty tedious. It wasn’t until I had to speak with the funeral home director that I felt anything other stupid relief for the lifting of her suffering. He asked what clothing I’d like her to be buried in. I was baffled. I didn’t know. He said I should choose an outfit she liked, one she thought she looked good in. I drove home thinking how silly the idea was—any nice clothing would do for entering the dirt to become food for insects.

So I got home and, thinking I’d pluck something off the shelf, I went into our closet. (In days, it will be no one’s. Yours, until you sell it.) Most of her clothes were dusty. I knew her so
well, yet something so small—what clothes she liked!—it was beyond me. There’s so much of her beyond my knowledge. Questions I should’ve asked, things I should’ve listened closer to. I lay down on her side of the bed, curled facing the edge of the bed, the way she slept. I thought that would comfort me or tell me something about her, but all I wanted was to be dead.

Which is strange. I’d never seriously considered suicide, not until that moment. It stayed with me until June checked on me in the morning before she went to work. Long story short, she went to the closet and picked out an outfit. When she came into the living room, holding that dress up by its coat hanger, I knew it was the one.

How did she know that and not me?

Honestly, though, until Adam came into town, I still wanted to simply stop breathing. I’ve never been so exhausted. Adam, he’s something else. He’s become an amazing person. I don’t think I’d seen him since you were in high school. I have to confess, I really disliked him when he was a kid. You probably don’t remember this, but when he was around five or six, June told him he was the son of god. I was irritated enough with June for that—your mother and I were always urging her away from religious weirdness—but after that Adam irked me, her too. He became eternally smug—takes one to know one, I know—this “look at me, I’m Jesus” mentality. And he was your best friend, but at times he acted like more than that, like he was your leader. It’s strange to wish your own child would punch another child in the face. I told your mother about that, that I kind of wished you’d fight him and no longer be friends with him, and she looked at me like she had no idea who I was. It took a lot to appall your mother those days, but I managed to accomplish it.

And of course, when he stopped being friends with you in junior high or high school, I wasn’t happy about it. I’d saved a little hope over the years for the time you two would split, but
not when it actually happened. He made that decision for you, and you were so sad after that. So I disliked him even more. As you know, I don’t like the word “hate,” but at times I hated that kid. Of course, this is probably all water under the bridge for you.

A couple hours after June picked out the dress for your mother and left, when he came to the door, I was so happy to see him. I have no idea why, but I gave him probably the biggest hug I’ve ever given anyone and let the floodgates open. I’ve never cried like that. Even when I was lying in your mother’s place in the bed, bawling like a child, that wasn’t close. I felt everything I ever have. I was so confused.

He talked me down. He could see my death on my mind, and he told me no, I would be wrong to kill myself. He said it so plainly, so openly. Honestly, I was more at ease listening to him tell me the horrible thoughts on my mind than I do now writing them down for you and knowing you’ll read them.

I can’t tell you what he told me after that, before you arrived. We swore secrecy. You’ll have to find out on your own, if you can. But by the time you arrived for your mother’s funeral, I wasn’t exactly myself. You were exactly yourself, of course—full of reasonable bitterness against me. I’m sorry I was aloof; I was thinking constantly of what Adam and I spoke of, and about your mother. I wanted to tell you everything then.

I don’t think I’ve ever told you this. A couple of days after you were born, we were at home, and she was holding you. You were fighting sleep, pawing at the air with your tiny large hands. Your mother was crying, and I asked her what was wrong. She told me she loved you so much, she was so happy, but she had the strangest sensation: she wanted you back in her womb. She said she’d never missed anything so much in her life as having you a part of her. That’s how I am now that she’s gone. I have nothing but wishes, ways I should have been better. I wish you
and I hadn’t stopped going to church with her. I wish—well, imagine sentences that begin this way going on for pages. I’ve had opportunity for happiness, and all that’s left is regret and the journey to some self that I don’t want to be. I won’t have that. I can die happily.

That word “blessed” reminds me: you used to ask me whether or not I believed in God. It’s silly to admit, but I’m not sure I understand what the question means. Do I believe in God? I don’t even know what “God” could possibly be. As a teen, I got so caught up in the juvenile question of what God might actually be and never matured past it. Though I use the word “believe” so many times—I believe so, yes, I believe my keys are still in my jacket pocket—I haven’t the slightest idea what it means. Isn’t that dim?

I’ve spent almost my entire life in school, but I can’t answer the question—do you believe in God?—because I don’t understand it. In the end, I’m a fool in a plaid shirt. (By the way, please do not bury me in plaid. Or I guess I hope you didn’t bury me in plaid. Let June pick out my clothes.)

I want to tell you something so you know I wasn’t so detached and careless as I might seem in your memory. Do you remember the time you hung out with Adam’s cousin in junior high, that night your mother called the police at 11 pm? Well, surprise: it wasn’t your mother who called the cops. We were both worried—you’d never been out that late, and you hadn’t even let us know you’d be hanging out after dinner. Your mother stayed more or less calm, but I freaked out. I called the police first at 10:30, and they laughed at me. When I called again at 11, they wanted to laugh again, but I bulldogged them into looking for you. I couldn’t wait around the house with you who knows where. I felt like your mother did after you were born.

When the police called and said they found you, I was relieved but felt stupid. I asked your mother to tell you she’d phoned the police and that I’d encouraged her not to, and when the
officer brought you in, reeking of cheap booze and covered in dirt, I was embarrassed and pissed. Angry at you, of course, but more at Adam, and at June for letting you go out with those boys, and at those boys for giving you drinks. So if you remember that night, at least the lecture I gave after the cops left, I’m sorry.

Enclosed are photographs of you and your mother I took over the years. Whenever I was aimless or unable to work or a little down, I looked at these. That means I’ve looked at these almost every week, some of them for thirty-plus years (hence the wear on the edges of the oldest). Other than your life and your mother’s, these are my most cherished things. Please keep them in the Mylar when you don’t have them out. I know they’ll go the way of all things, but even though I won’t last through the end of the day, I want them to remain as long as they can.

If I go on any further, I’ll live at least a thousand and one more nights, and I have things to do. And I think—hell, maybe I even believe—you’ll do better by finding my memories on your own.

Love, Dad
January 30-31: Last Days

As Adam’s Last Event neared, I worried. I hadn’t heard from him, and I feared the work I’d done was part of some elaborate prank. His apostles called at all hours—I would have been woken if not for my insomnia—asking if I’d heard further. They’d done all I’d asked, and they hung in the same nervous pattern of wait that I did. Taggart called daily, asking each time, “Anything else?” He never tried to convince me he wasn’t conning anyone, but the frequency of his calls seemed to be his argument. I wanted to ask what he’d heard from Ray, but I refused to show that to him.

In the meantime, I saw posters in subway stations, on storefront windows, light poles, parking meters and mail boxes and bike racks, all advertising in an infinite variety of handwriting and color that Adam Ellison, the New Christ, the Wanted Savior, the World’s Last Prophet, would speak at the southwest corner of Central Park, near Columbus Circle. These always woke me from the ritual slumber of moving through the city, but it wasn’t until I saw, inked in permanent marker in a library bathroom, an announcement for Adam’s Last Event, that I was angry. I’d thought of those worlds—my connection to Adam and my regular, daily life—as separate and distinct, orbiting one another safely. So I called Work Control and told them they had to deal immediately with the graffiti in the library’s bathrooms. We usually turned a blind eye to the racist, sexist, and sometimes inventive scrawlings of our students, so my insistence puzzled the man on the other end of the phone. He ended the call by telling me he’d do what he could. In English: don’t hold your breath.
The night before Adam’s event, I couldn’t sleep. I’d heard nothing from him, and my phone rang every twenty or so minutes until, after midnight, I unplugged it. Only Taggart didn’t call; I suppose he was certain I’d call if I had instructions for him. I was nervous about my own martyrdom, torn to pieces by angry apostles who saw a void in place of an event.

I was lying in bed with all the lights off when I heard a faint, constant knock at my front door. My adrenaline assumed it was Adam. But it wasn’t—it was Ray.

Rather, it was the ghost of Ray. She was horribly pale, her hair a greasy mess, the skin on her cheeks clinging to the bone.

“Look what you’ve done,” she said. Her voice rasped like a comb tugging at a knot of hair. “I need some money.”

She was using again.

“I can do whatever you want,” she said.

I invited her in. Once I closed the door, though, I said, “I won’t give you any money for that.”

“You should,” she said. “You’re responsible for this. Doing what you’re going to do to Adam tomorrow. Even Taggart thinks so.”

So he knew. Maybe that’s why he’d stopped calling. “I don’t care what Taggart thinks. I’m doing what Adam needs me to do.”

“Because you’re the only fucker who’ll do it.”

“You fucking betrayed him, too. Fucking, I might add.”

She sniffled, probably from the cold. “So you’re not going to help me either?”

“I’m not going to give you cash, if that’s what you’re asking.”
She walked past me to the door. “Well, it’s not a favor anyway.” She left the door open, leaving me to close it on her absence.

I got something that wasn’t sleep, but was the cousin of sleep and death. When I woke, I found Adam in my kitchen, sitting up but sleeping. He’d grown a beard, and his hair was careless. All those bodies in his wake: my mother, my father, the suicides, and Ray on her way. I could’ve killed him then and saved the rest of the world a lot of trouble. Instead, I watched him at his rest. As his belly filled with air, his head rose a mere inch, then fell, and whatever dreams he had tumbled into his mind.

I said his name; his eyes opened. “Thomas,” he said and smiled. I imagined someone plunging a knife into his stomach, and him disappearing, and all my troubles going with him. “You’re angry,” he said, “but it’s good to see you.”

“How did you get in?”

“Door’s unlocked.”

We had a full day ahead. He was fasting—no food, no water—and doing his version of praying, a kind of meditation, where it didn’t matter how he sat, how he breathed, how the world went on around him. I went out for lunch, a sandwich I barely ate; I couldn’t stand to be around his peace.

I tried to walk around, but it was misting and chilly, so I bought a newspaper and rode the subway to one end and back. I managed to disappear into the paper, the newsprint in my fingerprints by the time I came around and realized I was one stop from my apartment. It was mid-afternoon, and soon we’d have to get ready to walk south through the park to what Adam thought was his destiny.
But from outside my apartment I could hear him coughing. I ran in and found him on my bed, fetal-curled, his face red and wet. I brought him water and a washcloth, the same ragged green one I’d had since I first left home for college.

He sat up and sipped water, but he couldn’t stop crying, even as his cough subsided. “I’m afraid,” he said. “I can’t do this.”

I told him he didn’t have to; that seemed to steel him. He scrubbed his face with the dry washcloth and cleared his throat. He slowed his breath. I watched as his version of calm, something I’d never have, imbued his face and body, and I recalled the story he’d told about the guru who grew, then ungrown, a cancer. Maybe Adam wasn’t a savior, but if he could make a life like this for himself, he was a miracle.

We readied ourselves to go—me in a waterproof coat and hat, him in a sweater and wool pants. I told him he’d freeze; he said it didn’t matter. He had a point.

We left the house and walked through the park, keeping on the grass, trying to keep Adam from being seen until we got to Columbus Circle. Though we stayed off the paths, followers heading down to see his performance spotted us. They called out his name, yelled “Don’t go!” “Don’t leave us!” Soon there were dozens walking behind us, their chatter gusting at our backs. The mist evaporated, and though it stayed cold, the sun came out for the first time all day.

“Dumb luck,” Adam said.

People flanked us as we got closer to our destination; the noise of the multitude wafted to us.

I asked, “What do you want me to say?”
“Just introduce me. Simple. Whatever you’d like to say.”

I nodded toward the crowd noise. “I don’t think you need an introduction.”

He stopped walking. We were twenty yards from where the park opened up to Columbus Circle. “Say what needs to be said. Just say what you know.”

“What do I know?”

He smiled. We walked on. The noise around us swelled, and when someone in Columbus Circle yelled, “There he is,” a roar burst, and we walked into its raw breath, out from the shade of the trees and onto a makeshift wooden stage, a raft big enough for three, and a microphone stood with its cord trailing to a receiver that extended through cords to amplifiers on stands, and these people wanted, needed, desired Adam, and he put his hand on my shoulder to remind me to introduce him, and I couldn’t fathom an audience this large, this desirous of some truth. Adam’s hand extended his calm to me, and I stepped up to the mic with my breath nearly regular as adherents still yelled for Adam. People blocked the traffic; police far on the margins tried to squeeze toward the stage.

I said “Hello” into the microphone, and listening quiet spread over the crowd from the first crush of people to the distant stragglers curious about the assembly. “Hello,” I said again. “Thank you for coming. Adam thanks you for coming.” My voice quavered, and I stuttered over consonants that clustered like seeds in my mouth. “I know some of you, and some of you know me. But who I am is not important. No matter what I could say, it would be dwarfed by what you want to hear, and by what Adam will say. And maybe what he says will matter less than the spirit his words summon. You’ll go home tonight with an untranslatable notion in your brain of the warmth of the sun and the sway of Adam’s words. You’ll call it faith. And as long as you’re alive you’ll—maybe it’ll stay with you forever—but more likely you’ll dig to find it in yourself.”
somewhere, and looking like that will kill you, because you’ll never find it. You’ll uncover other treasures, other faiths, or maybe for a moment this night will return to you, then disappear again like a thief in the night.”

I looked back at Adam. His face showed what I read as approval. I turned back to the congregants. “Because what else can you do but search? Even if it doesn’t do you any good.” I glanced at a tight cluster of people near the stage. Among them was Ray. She looked worse than when she’d appeared at my door in need and I’d turned her away. Several yards behind her stood Taggart. I couldn’t tell if they’d come together or were ignorant of each other’s presence.

“Anyway,” I said, deflating, “here’s the man you want to see, the fugitive savior, Adam Ellison.”

Adam hugged me hard, and one of his knuckles pressed into my back. He said something I couldn’t hear over the aural mess. Then he stepped to the microphone and spoke.

Honestly, I have no memory of what he said. I’ve read the newspaper accounts and the varying summaries online. The gist: We must sacrifice every part of ourselves. Life is death. We must know and own this world as deeply as we can, and we must never assume an iota of certainty. Our search for God must be complete and must remain incomplete. And any act of violence against another person is the worst possible sin, whether it’s in the name of a just war or in a moment of passion. He told much of this through a parable of Christ under torture.

But I remember little of what he said because I watched Ray. She would glare at Adam, then me, alternating throughout. When I wasn’t watching her—the depths of those eyes in her hollow face daunted me—I eyed the police nudging their ways through the mob. I even noticed—a shock, as he’d grown thin and austere—Shannon, the friend of Adam’s cousin, Eric. He smiled at me, a benign smile, the closest I’ve ever seen to Adam’s. I nodded; he nodded back.
All in all, Adam’s sermon was only a few minutes, under the time limit imposed by the encroaching authorities. He ended with a goodbye: he would have to leave this world. Like all things, he too must end, though what he said would live if they carried it. His message threatened the false peace of the false world, and they came for him.

His listeners turned to see police coming for him, now more than halfway through the crowd—I spun to see officers fighting through the audience behind us—and Adam stepped to my side.

“Are you ready?” he bleated.

I wasn’t. He could tell from my face I didn’t even have the courage to move. The audience and city line beyond were so vivid and fully detailed that I had the difficulty focusing I had when I first looked at a Hieronymus Bosch painting, the mass of men engorged on life itself.

He grabbed the back of my head and made me face him. My nose grazed his. “You should know something. I killed your father. He asked me to. I ground those pills into a powder and helped him drink them. I helped him prevent himself from throwing him up. I think it’s important you know that.”

It wasn’t about courage but rage at that point. I grabbed Adam’s hair and yanked him toward the microphone. I began to shout about how he was a murderer, but our momentum drove his head into the mic and sent it toppling off the stage in a screech of feedback. Many turned to watch us. I held him upright by his hair and screamed, “This is your god!” I punched him in the stomach. Adam doubled over and coughed up a black and bloody gob of phlegm. He tried to stand, still hunched, and continued coughing. People charged the stage, but the throng of legs tripped them up.
But Ray stepped forward and raised a gun. The police were within yards of the stage, but they didn’t see her aim at me. She tried to kill me. They saw the aftermath, though: Adam moved in front and took the necessary bullet between two ribs. The momentum sent his body into mine, and we fell together. I heard screaming and the chaos of trampling; Adam’s body was wet and heavy on mine. His troubled breathing resonated in my stomach. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, which could only reach us after the panicked crowd scattered, Adam died.

That was his final punishment for me, to let me live.
Chapter and Verse: The Death of Christ

Thirty-six—

“But then a scalding light raided the room again, this time a brighter bulb birthed from the hand of the masked man.

“Threatening with a knife, he strapped the man of war to the table. Once he finished, he pointed the knife at the man’s eye and said, ‘You, sleep.’ Then, he held the same knife at the tottering belly of Christ. ‘Do not lose your footing,’ the man said. ‘If you lose your footing, you are not the Christ.’

“The man of war heard Christ’s toes pawing at the floor, the chains that held his arms clinking and straining as he moved. The masked man stood over the man of war and held the knife out, its end tinted red. ‘You see? Your Christ is a man. No matter how much you think he suffers for you, he is still a man.’ He put the knife up to the man of war’s nose and inserted it into the tip of the cartilage, the first physical harm they had done to him.

“The masked man left. ‘Don’t worry,’ the man of war said. ‘I will not sleep while you cannot.’

“Then music blared, a high-pitched, atonal set of strings. A few seconds later, a rumbling soundtrack of noisy, unintelligible conversations from a crowded place added itself to the strings. An occasional sentence resounded out—‘we know your secrets,’ ‘think of the lives you’ll save,’ ‘it can be over when you want.’ And then to these two sounds came another chorus, this time of hissing voices shushing over and over.
“‘Don’t worry,’ the man of war said to Christ. ‘This will all be over soon. I’ll stay awake with you.’ But he didn’t know if Christ heard him or if his voice merely disintegrated into the others.

“Eventually, the man of war fell asleep, though those of us who sleep might not call it sleep.

Thirty-seven—

“He awoke some time later, unaware of when, for the lacquer of skin oil on his face had been so for some also unknowable time, as had the hunger in his stomach, a hunger that the food they provided him with did not sate.

“The volume of the droning noises lowered to such a point that the man of war could not tell if the repeated string notes he heard were echoes of the sounds that had pounded into his senses or merely music they continued to play through the speakers. He strained to hear; the straining hurt, the minute movement of his ears and the pressure he put on his own understanding.

“After a time, the man of war noticed his urge to urinate and, ashamed, began yelling to the masked men—out of the room but presumably listening—to let him relieve himself. His shouts resonated emptily back to him off the walls and the body of Christ. The man of war forced himself to look at the hanging, balancing body of Christ and saw Christ’s toes among a slick spot of his own waste.

“So the man of war, moved by the suffering of Christ, decided to try and accept the shame of soiling himself. Yet with that attempt at acceptance, he found himself unable to relieve himself.
“As he felt the strange shame in the dryness of his clothes, he wondered at the suffering of Christ, which offered him here no reprieve. His mind danced to the strings, real or not, in his ears—his mind imitating the invention of dance itself, a pattern both graceful and clumsy. Was the man of war not faithful enough to Christ? Had his actions, done nominally and actually in defense of the safety and nobility of others, offended his God in some way?

Thirty-eight—

“Or, as the thought that haunted him most, its branches pollinated by his guilt—was this Christ nothing? Was the idea of Christ’s suffering in turn for the suffering of man a lie? Had the man of war misjudged the depth of his own suffering by projecting it onto a then-unknown man? But not a man, less than a man and more—the idea of a man, yet an idea made sweat and flesh and blood and excrement in this prison. That chapped thing hung from shackles, so easily restrained and unresponsive to the power of the man of war’s faith.

“No—no! It could not be a lie. Could it?

“He looked at Christ. Jesus wept, still. Then he said, barely audible to the man of war, ‘You have forsaken me. Why have you forsaken me?’

“No, the man of war thought, it could not be. The suffering could not be lost, the cause not lost.

“The masked men entered again, this time each bearing whips. One—the one who had been unseen—stood a foot before the man of war, facing Christ. The other whipped Christ’s chest, then when Christ turned, his back.

“‘What do you have to tell us?’ the interrogator asked the man of war. The other masked man paused his whipping.
“‘I created all the sin and misery in the world,’ the man of war said. He detailed many things—acts of lust, of greed, of gluttony, and on—some of which were true. Those which were not true were true in his mind and heart; he could see his body enacting degradations he’d barely thought possible.

“‘You will never tell us the truth,’ the interrogator said.

“‘Please,’ said the man of war. ‘I have told you my bones.’

Thirty-nine—

“The other masked man resumed whipping Christ with the effort of a man hammering at midday.

“‘Please,’ said the man of war. ‘Let me whip him.’

“The masked men stared at the man of war. Though they were masked, the man of war could read their surprise. The quiet one unlatched the straps across the prisoner’s chest. The interrogator handed his whip to the man of war as the other trained his gun on him.

“Though he felt he knew whips intimately—mainly from films—he’d never handled one. He turned it in his hand, the cloth wrapped around the handle rough and unwashed, stained with the sweat and work of other hands.

“Christ faced him, the two whip marks across his chest like warped tire tracks. The man of war raised the whip, then brought his body and the twined rope forward with all the force his exhausted body could call upon. His eyes were closed on contact, but he felt in his palms and fingers the wretched, happy kickback of the lash. He felt the echo of Christ’s pain and knew that it was good.
“He whipped Christ over and again, drawing blood with each wild stroke. He recited phrases as he did so—‘Why hast thou forsaken me?’ and ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.’ He felt that with each violent stroke, he must be bringing Christ closer to his status as sufferer for humankind.

“After a time, physical exhaustion had robed the man of war. Though he was, truly, a man of war, this was the first physical violence he had enacted with his own hands. He dropped the whip and felt his new calluses throb. He turned and found that the masked men had gone. Had Christ suffered in the service of anything?

“Stripes of blood cross Christ’s chest, some spilling dribs of blood like the rim of a cup. The man of war felt thirst and went forward. He sucked the wounds of Christ as he had done symbolically so many times in the churches of his life.

“On his knees, he leaned back and tasted the warmth and iron.

Forty—

“Jesus spoke. ‘The blood does not heal those who desire it. It only heals those who need.’

“‘But I need it,’ the man of war said. ‘I do.’

“‘But you must need without desire,’ the Anointed said. ‘And you must see your life as that which gives and as that which fails. Above all, you must strive to have no self, to be a man of nothing.’

“‘I have read your words,’ the man of war said, ‘and followed your teaching. So how did I end up on this path?’

“‘Who am I to judge you?’ said Christ before he died again. ‘I have come to offer you not a past, but a future.’”
February 1: Brief Sentence

I missed Adam’s funeral. I regret that because I know June needed someone by her side, someone she knew and trusted. And she’d lost my parents, Adam, her husband long ago, then me. And where was I? In jail. The police had seen my introduction and wanted information; I told them everything I knew and nothing I suspected. The handcuffs marked the underside of my wrist with a bloody welt I’ve come to call my stigmata now that I’m out. Ultimately, they had nothing to charge me with and let me go.

Taggart visited me in jail. He wore tattered clothes and said he’d given the money he’d collected on Adam’s behalf—hundreds of thousands of dollars—to charities for poverty. “It’s all meaningless, though. Doesn’t change a thing.” All over he seemed gray, even the hue of his skin seeming infected by the tinge of his veins. He told me everyone he’d talked to blamed me, me and the police. Though the newspaper reported that Ray had fired, not the cops, most of Adam’s followers refused to believe that. And since she was dead—I hadn’t heard—I needed to be careful when I got out.

He wouldn’t tell me how she died; I learned from a newspaper that she’d overdosed. The coroner initially thought she’d been trampled in the melee after the shooting, given the heavy bruises on her body, but he found her blood was toxic. She could’ve killed herself three times over.

Before he left, I asked across the table, “Tell me, so I can know. What’s your real name?” He smiled; rather, the hinges of his mouth rose out of habit. “Adam said you’d ask.”

“And?”

“You won’t believe me.” He stood. “Thomas Miller.”
The funeral was attended by nearly a thousand; a couple dozen of those were police who had to barricade the cemetery. Followers and protesters pressed against the fences and mourned with their full throats. Aware of the threats from Adam’s apostles, June had his body cremated.

I suffered what I suffered in jail, and when I was released, under the protective watch of the police, I packed my suitcase and flew home to live with June.
Chapter and Verse: Death and Resurrection

Forty-one—

When Adam finished his sermon, the crowd waited in awe. The authorities had crept closer. They said to each other, “They are one people, and this is what they begin to do.” And so they struck at Adam as one thinks to kill the root of a tree. “My body!” Adam cried. “They take my body, but I and you shall begin and end again.”

His followers watched his body die and sent lamentations to the whole world.

Forty-two—

The authorities tried to silence them, but even they bowed to the next miracle of Adam’s life: his body disintegrated into ash and lifted itself upon the wind. The ash met the bodies of the believers and entered into them. For the rest of their lives, they had visions and the counsel of Adam. Adam said to them, “I give all authority to you. Go and preach everywhere, and when you preach those who have eyes to believe shall be followed by signs. Your spirit will infuse their lungs with prayer.”

Forty-three—

There are many other things Adam has done, but the world itself could not contain him, nor could it contain the books that would be written of his life.
February 2: Revelations

Consider this the world’s longest suicide note. No more pencils, no more books. Which is the way the world ends? God is simple, not complex. Life is God, and God is life. That's all you know, and all you need to know, etc. If we could know everything, from the beginning to the end, head and nose and fingers and toes and all that, then we would know that we are God that we, life, are God. God is everything. It isn't that profound, and if we knew it, we would understand that God is not profound all. God is dead when death is.

God is the wiggle in my toe, the wind reparting my hair, dust repatriated by the wind. I don't have time or ink enough to catalog it all, and that's why God wins in the end. Time is on his side. If there were world enough and time, I'd hop in time’s winged Chevrolet and outrun God. But since we can't abolish time, since God, if he's there, created the way to prevent us from knowing him or it, we beat him the only way we can, Adam’s way. We die.

I lasted one day with June. She had Adam’s eyes, or rather he had hers, and the way she looked at me without accusation gave an irony to even the most mundane comments. So I didn’t even unpack my suitcase.

I stole Adam’s ashes. It’s the only knowingly cruel thing I've ever done to June. I’d like to say I did it to protect her, but why lie in the last moments of my life? I stole his ashes and made them into this ink.

I’m sorry, June. Read it and weep. These are his words on the page, not mine.

Or don’t. I’ve decided to burn it all along with me. By the time it’s done, there won’t even be a trace of ash.
I’m tempted to think of that painting of St. Matthew looking up to an angel as his pen transcribes the words of God, and to say we’ve misinterpreted it all these years. Matthew is not receiving the word of God from on high, he’s refusing to look at the words that God makes on the page. The angel is there to distract him. We cannot see God, and to watch those words form themselves would be to watch God reveal itself in ink.

So Adam, prophet or what have you, was right. In death, we don't go to God, we escape. We beat it. Here’s what I’ve discovered. Eliot had it wrong. The world doesn’t end with a bang or a whimper. It simply doesn’t.
Beyond Literary Fiction: Clarifying the Creative-Writing Classroom

In his Introduction to *McSweeney’s Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, Michael Chabon attacks the orthodoxy of the terms *literary fiction* and *genre fiction* as mere commercial distinctions. He writes, “For even the finest writer of horror or sf or detective fiction, the bookstore, to paraphrase the LA funk band War, is a ghetto.” Later he refers to the genre sections of chain retailer Barnes & Noble (and by implication all bookstores with such sections) as “the genre slums” (x). Despite his aggressive tone, Chabon understates how pervasive those terms are. He ascribes them only to marketers, but they have reached such cultural authority that they are ubiquitous in book reviews and, more problematically, in creative-writing classrooms. Book reviews in American newspapers and magazines regularly use *literary fiction*, and a sampling of syllabi for undergraduate fiction writing classes will turn up many that employ the phrase as a prescriptive: many workshop teachers prohibit students from turning in genre fiction, asking them instead to turn in literary fiction. For example, one teacher tells his students they can write about anything—“‘Anything but orcs’” (Piafsky), using the creature invented by J. R. R. Tolkien and borrowed by many fantasy writers for their own work as a shorthand for *genre fiction*.

While teachers may see themselves as upholding literature against what they see as the easier pleasures of genre, I propose teachers of creative writing not only eliminate *literary fiction* but also replace it. I think we should replace rather than simply ignore it in part because it serves a useful role—along with *genre fiction*, it describes, in part, what readers expect from texts and what writers attempt to achieve. Also, a key purpose of the term is to demarcate quality fiction acceptable for university-level workshops and that which is not. As the number of degree-granting programs in creative writing continues to rise—the Association of Writers and Writing
Programs reports 67 new programs instituted between 2002 and 2004 (Quarracino)—the need for clear, coherent terminology rises as well. Creative writing occupies the curious position now as both a process that often defies description and prescription, and a discipline requiring a set of guidelines to substantiate its value among such fields as Literature, Theory and Criticism, Rhetoric and Composition, Journalism, and the other fields of study with which it shares programmatic affiliation and office space. However, as I will argue, the weaknesses of *literary fiction* as a term far outweighs its usefulness, mainly because its definitions are abstract and unclear; moreover, because good fiction is exceptional—that is, both excellent and an exception to most fiction—it resists definition. In their place, I put forward the terms plot-oriented, character-oriented, form-oriented, and language-oriented. Though I do not intend these terms as the end of the discussion, they offer readers and writers more flexibility in describing prose fiction, and they also come without the problematic value judgments built into *literary fiction* and *genre fiction*.

Despite the prevalence of the term, few writers or critics define it. Some linguists and philosophers employ *literary fiction* to refer to all written prose fiction, to distinguish it from oral fiction.¹ In the discipline of creative writing, broadly speaking—by which I include textbooks, book reviews, and trade magazines about writing and publishing—*literary fiction* appears most commonly in how-to trade magazines and in opinion pieces about the state of literature. The academic work of creative writers includes only occasional mentions, though the term abounds among teachers of creative writing. The most prominent text within the academy to attempt a definition of *literary fiction* is Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction*, now in its eighth edition a mainstay of undergraduate fiction-writing classrooms. My analysis will focus closely on

¹ See Gregory Currie’s *The Nature of Fiction* and essays in *Fiction Updated: Theories of Fictionality, Narratology, and Poetics*. 

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Burroway because of the paradoxical silence about this commonly used vocabulary of **literary** and **genre** within the creative-writing discipline. No one else has endeavored to clearly, substantively define the term, so the shortcomings of the field in general burden her definition. I should note that I use Burroway’s text regularly when I teach, and I recommend it to other teachers of fiction. Her clear, efficient definitions of the vocabulary of the fiction-writing classroom, and her thorough examples of technique, are very good. Unfortunately, the contrast between her clarity in defining most terminology and her contradictions and unhelpful abstractions in defining **literary fiction** put the problems of the latter in sharp relief. Also, when one considers the time and attention given to canon formation elsewhere in departments of English, the lack of an engaged discourse about one of the essential features of most workshops stands out as a serious blind spot.

Appearing in the Appendix of *Writing Fiction*, Burroway’s definition of **literary fiction** demonstrates the problems with general acceptance of the term as a teaching tool. Her definition is abstract, unclear, and imprecise, impeding teachers from transferring its meaning to students. Beginning her definition, she writes, “Mainstream fiction is **literary fiction** if its appeal is also lodged in the original, interesting, and illuminating use of the language; the term also implies a degree of care in the psychological exploration of its characters, and an attempt to shed light on the human condition” (397). Each modifier is loaded or abstract: original, interesting, illuminating, degree of care, the human condition. How does a teacher explain what constitutes “an attempt” to illuminate humanity, much less whether or not the attempt succeeds? How about a “degree of care”? Note also the assumptions of her definition: One can approach fiction with a singular notion of humanity and psychology, when the notion of a character’s psychology
emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, concurrent with explorations of interior monologue as a narrative technique.

Following her initial definition, Burroway contrasts \textit{literary fiction} with \textit{genre fiction}, in part because the characteristics of genre fiction are more concrete: “the former is character-driven, the latter plot-driven” (397). That common distinction, frequently employed by book reviewers and librarians as well as teachers of creative writing, simply isn’t accurate. Writers often classified as literary by their inclusion in anthologies and textbooks of \textit{literary fiction} focus little on character and much more on other elements—form, language, and plot. Donald Barthelme and George Saunders, for example, often draw the reader’s attention to the conventions of genre and focus on the construction of those forms more than on character development. The other distinctions Burroway makes are slippery as well: genre fiction has “a strong tendency . . . to imply that life is fair, and to let the hero or heroine, after great struggle, win out in the end; and of literary fiction to posit that life is not fair, that triumph is partial, happiness tentative, and that the heroine and hero are subject to mortality” (397). Though the tendencies Burroway notes of \textit{genre fiction} occur frequently, as mere tendencies they invite exception. Also, the tendencies Burroway ascribes to \textit{literary fiction} are, in some cases, reductive and inaccurate. For example, what does it mean that a fiction posits “that life is not fair”? Can teachers require that philosophy of student fiction? Does it even accurately describe fictions one might classify as \textit{literary}? That criterion for what writers attempt to convey seems both dull—imagine readers picking up a book because it will confirm their assumption that life is not fair—and too broad.

The distinctions Burroway makes are not simply descriptive, however; she devotes a paragraph to justifying the rejection of genre stories from workshops, making the leap from
as a descriptive term to a prescriptive term. Burroway argues, “whereas writing literary fiction can teach you how to write good genre fiction, writing genre fiction does not teach you how to write good literary fiction—does not, in effect, teach you ‘how to write,’ by which I mean how to be original and meaningful in words” (398). As deconstructive theorists as well as T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” have demonstrated that the concept of originality is a complex, that texts develop out of and, in many cases, borrow from, past writing. Burroway’s gloss also ignores writers such as Jonathan Lethem, who in his novel *Motherless Brooklyn* employs elements of the hard-boiled detective genre, yet creates what reviewers, bookstores, and literary magazines categorize as a work of literary fiction.2

That said, Burroway has good reasons for attempting to delineate how teachers value fiction in the workshop. She argues about the distinction between literary and genre fiction in order to defend creative writing’s place in the academy:

[D]ealing in the conventions and hackneyed phrases of romance, horror, fantasy, and so forth can operate as a form of personal denial, using writing as a means of avoiding rather than uncovering your real concerns. It may be fine to offer readers an escape through fiction, but it isn’t a way to educate yourself as a writer, and it’s also fair to say that escape does not represent the goal of a liberal education, which is to pursue, inquire, seek, and extend knowledge of whatever subject is at hand, fiction no less than science.

(398-99)

She continues to rely on broad, unjustified assumptions—genre necessarily employs “hackneyed phrases,” for example—but more importantly Burroway argues for the place of creative writing

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2 Lethem’s novel is not an exception. In his above-mentioned Introduction, Chabon lists as important “literary” writers who rely on genre conventions the following: Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Anita Brookner, John Fowles, Steven Millhauser, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, A.S. Byatt, and Cormac McCarthy. He could also have listed a few of the writers included in his anthology, among them Margaret Atwood, Heidi Julavits, and Joyce Carol Oates.
in the curriculum. Notably, she uses the idealizing language familiar to most justifications of liberal education, as she relies on assumptions about genre. She also assumes the psychological functions of genre fiction, that it serves as an escape for readers and helps writers evade their personal problems; conversely, then, literary fiction must also serve the psychological purpose of helping writers confront and understand their problems. That logic is misleading. Though many people read genre fiction as an “escape,” many genre novels approach complex social issues and, in creating a manifestly unreal world, point back to the world the reader and writer inhabit.

Burroway does acknowledge how realism functions as a convention for so-called literary fiction. That observation matters because what gets called literary fiction has its genres as well: the coming-of-age story, the failed middle-ager story, the epiphanic story and its many variations, and so on. Though these conventions are less hard-and-fast than mystery and western, consider the coming-of-age story, or Bildungsroman, a genre as old as the novel, and even older if one considers its roots in the quest narrative. In novels such as Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones and J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, to choose two well-known examples, a younger individual challenges the traditions that surround him and adapts to how those have traditions have changed or fail him. Each protagonist distances himself in some way from authority figures and learns new modes of understanding just as he approaches new complications: Tom Jones in his journey to London away from his absurd teachers, Holden Caulfield in his weekend in New York away from the preparatory school he has just flunked out of.

Predating Burroway’s text, John Gardner’s The Art of Fiction reveals another problem of Burroway’s definition: “the artist’s primary unit of thought—his primary conscious or unconscious basis for selecting and organizing the details of his work—is genre” (20). He then goes on to give what seems to me a better understanding of what could be termed literary fiction,
though he doesn’t use the term: “Novelty comes chiefly from ingenious genre-crossing or elevation of familiar materials” (21). Gardner reveals that the distinction between literary and genre prevents us from acknowledging how literary texts achieve some novelty, foreclosing teachers from fruitful discussions of the relationships between existing fictional forms and how writers employ them: Distinguishing literary from genre actually prevents us from talking about good fiction and demonstrate to our students what makes fiction novel.

Within academia, Burroway’s attempt to define literary fiction is an outlier; most definitions of the term “literary fiction” appear outside academia, in articles and books that discern for unpublished writers certain marketplace distinctions in fiction. These advisory texts highlight how literary fiction operates not as a definitive but as a commercial distinction, one that doesn’t necessarily have to do with quality and that is, in many ways, abstract. In the American Library Association’s Readers’ Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction, Joyce Saricks defines literary fiction both by its reception—“Literary Fiction is critically acclaimed, often award-winning, fiction”—and by a list of five characteristics (127). The list of characteristics includes phrases similar to those book reviewers often employ: “literary style is important,” “[c]haracters emerge as more important than story lines,” literary fiction “operates in the realm of ideas as well as practicalities,” “pacing is slower,” and the tone “may be bleaker, darker, because of the seriousness of the issues considered” (127). Saricks acknowledges how contingent those characteristics are on each writer’s style and choice of subject matter. However, her characteristics offer little descriptive and applicable to specific literary texts—that some aspects are more “important,” that tone “may be” bleaker or darker. That contingency and abstraction limits the practical applicability of the terms.
Of course, Saricks isn’t concerned with creating a fixed definition for practitioners; the goal of the ALA’s Reader’s Advisory Guide is to help librarians tasked with organizing fiction. Saricks admits that she includes “Literary Fiction” in its own chapter as if it were a genre because “it helps librarians to do so” (126). Saricks sees her role as reflecting the marketplace and the interests of consumers. Still, aside from Burroway’s Writing Fiction, hers is one of the most thorough attempts to define literary fiction. Since then, other writers have addressed the categorical divisions in the marketplace. In an article for Writer, a self-described trade magazine of “advice and inspiration for today’s writer,” Moira Allen attempted to more clearly define literary fiction by interviewing editors from more than a dozen literary magazines, the well-established Glimmer Train, Iowa Review, and Ploughshares among them. Allen distilled their responses into two central characteristics: an emphasis on character over plot, and a distinctive style or voice, the two characteristics that, while general, emerge most commonly among definitions of literary fiction. Many of their definitions recall Burroway’s definition in Writing Fiction; it’s unclear whether the editors developed these definitions from Burroway or from a broader disciplinary conversation with creative writers outside publication. That said, the unanimity among the creative-writing community—editors, writers, and teachers—suggests an approach to the terminology as fixed and evident. Though the creative-writing community of the marketplace (among this I include editors, publishers, and booksellers) has an incentive to keep a broad, open definition of literary fiction, the overlap between the marketplace and academic definitions indicates that they are functionally the same. However, the marketplace definitions offer little clarity about literary fiction, yet they maintain the prescriptive quality of Burroway’s.  

3 I should acknowledge that the editors’ responses are conversational, so my criticism of them may seem harsher than I intend it. Having worked as an editor for literary magazines, I understand the difficulty of describing generally the work one chooses to publish.
Two of the most prominent quotes recall Burroway’s definition of *literary fiction* as “character-driven.” Beth Alverado, fiction editor of *Cutthroat*, responded that “The arc of the narrative—if there is a narrative—is driven by the characters’ conflicts or desires,” and Regina Williams, editor and publisher of *The Storyteller*, said, “I believe literary fiction is character-driven, not plot-driven” (31). The fact that *driven* is the most common adjective for describing fiction as a whole suggests a reading experience directed entirely by the author or text. That also assumes a particular, yet generalizable, kind of passive reader, effectively negating the role of the active individual who can apply her own perspective as well as those she has learned.

The editors also employ slippery, general language that’s less descriptive than idealized. Alvarado elaborated on characterization in literary fiction thus: “The best of literary fiction gives us glimpses of the characters’ particular worlds and relationships and also opens a ‘new’ window on to our own worlds and lives and relationships” (31). Words like *glimpses* reiterate the loose contours of the definition, and the scare quotes around *new* suggest that even Alvarado knows that her language lacks something. Those scare quotes also demonstrate the necessity of a stable, inactive reader: how can one measure a “new” window on one’s world, life, or relationships?

Can we operate as if a single reader, much less a broader set of readers, has a view of the world that one can demarcate prior to reading a text? That assumption about readership requires universality among readers one is unlikely to find, even in a classroom of undergraduates. Allen quotes John Wang, editor of the literary magazine *Juked*, who describes literary fiction as “anything that sheds some kind of insight on the human condition, escapism that ultimately brings you back to the present world in a way, teaches you something about it. . . . That fiction has to do something to shed light on our world, and not only take you away from it. While doing so, it should challenge our understanding of the world, make us question our preconceived
notions of it” (32). Again, Wang relies on a static reader: “our understanding of the world,” “our preconceived notions of it.” Wang also recalls Burroway when he refers to the human condition, invoking a clichéd generality that elides difference. In discussing style, too, one of the editors evokes such idealism. They speak of “a strong, distinctive voice,” “something that is unprecedented,” “fiction that attempts to communicate ideas, concepts or feelings that transcend the structural elements of the story,” “writing that is entirely memorable, vivid, and original,” and “originality, daring. That indefinable thing: panache” (30–31).

Those generalities not only fall short of concretizing *literary fiction*, they smooth over the role the marketplace plays in the categorization of fiction. Literary magazines are small marketplaces, largely supported by university departments of English; such magazines have the opportunity to publish a range of work, from the more experimental to the more accessible. The book market, currently contracting, has fewer opportunities to publish the experimental. Writing about literary fiction published in the nineties, particularly about what he calls “commercial fiction,” fiction writer Jonathan Baumbach defines literary fiction by textual qualities and the reader’s perspective. He writes, “Originality tends to generate difficulty in that it breaks faith with expectation, undermines the prevailing verities of last season’s fashion. Originality takes us by surprise. Surprise, to my way of seeing, is one of the touchstones of art. Literary art is always difficult during our first unescorted encounter with it” (180–81). Though the concept of “originality” is notoriously problematic—especially when teaching undergraduates with limited reading experience—Baumbach connects originality to difficulty in a way the editors quoted in Allen’s piece do not.4

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4 The different stakes Allen and Baumbach affect their arguments; Allen writes to encourage writers, whereas Baumbach, as a writer of experimental fiction, must explain why difficult fiction is less common in the marketplace.
Publishers, Baumbach reasons, have to market and sell literary fiction that does not challenge readers too much. He writes, “Commercial publishing tends with the best of faith and the desperation of economic necessity to court literary work that is a thinly disguised variation on the recognizably artful—last year's award winner tricked out to seem at once new and safely familiar” (180). Though Baumbach’s claim portrays publishers (and the fiction they promote) cartoonishly as mere recyclers, it has an element of truth. In his essay “The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975,” Richard Ohmann argues that the marketplace in critical attention skews the attention of the academy. After detailing the correlation between the advertising dollars of Random House’s advertising campaigns and the statistically high number of reviews of Random House titles in the New York Times Book Review and the New York Review of Books, Ohmann concludes, “One need not subscribe to conspiracy theories in order to see, almost everywhere one looks in the milieu of publishing and reviewing, linkages of fellowship and common interest” (205). The cycle of selection and publication of fiction, Ohmann claims, leads to “the simultaneous exploitation and creation of taste, familiar to anyone who has examined marketplace culture under monopoly capitalism” (202). The “fellowship and common interest” Ohmann identifies in the publishing industry conflicts with the vision of fiction that “should challenge our understanding of the world, make us question our preconceived notions of it.”

Far from being irrelevant to the university, the marketplace definitions of literary fiction above matter intensely. Recall how Janet Burroway begins her definition of literary fiction: as a subset of mainstream fiction. Prior to that, she writes, “Mainstream refers to fiction that deals with subject matter with a broad appeal—situations and emotions common to and of interest to large numbers of readers in the culture for which it is intended” (397). That definition is reasonable and difficult to argue with; however, as a point of departure for defining literary
fiction, it limits the scope of the definition to the marketplace and assumes “broad appeal” as the starting point for identification. Given the relatively low stature of literary fiction on bestseller lists and the role of marketing and reviews in book sales, winnowing the definition with “mainstream” skews away from what Baumbach identifies as fiction that “is always difficult during our first unescorted encounter with it.”

Oddly enough, though genre fiction often sells well, Burroway tries to classify it as outside the mainstream. She writes, “Note again that the very naming of these kinds of fiction implies a narrowing; unlike mainstream fiction, they appeal to a particular range of interest” (398). If we define mainstream as having broad appeal, then the brisk sales of genre fiction relative to literary fiction place the generic within the mainstream, not the literary. As an article from 1996 notes, “While Jhumpa Lahiri and other literary authors may receive more critical acclaim than, say, Danielle Steel, that doesn’t mean their books are flying off the shelves. In fact, booksellers and publishers agree that the hardest sell right now is literary fiction.” The realities of the marketplace contradict the framing of Burroway’s definition.

If the language is so flawed, then how did literary fiction gain such a well-established foothold in creative-writing discourse? Unlike most literary-critical terminology, literary fiction seems in some ways without a history, or at least a relatively recent one. Debates about plot and character have continued since Aristotle’s Poetics, on through E.M. Forster, Burroway’s editions of Writing Fiction, and other texts. Given the silence about literary fiction, though, I think it’s important to try and map its history and various uses, even if we must do so at times putting only tentative dotted lines down rather than bold demarcations. This is not the space for a detailed history, but I will address a few historical moments I see as crucial to the development of literary fiction.
The simplest use of the term is as a distinction between oral literature and written literature. In his essay “The Rise of Literary Fiction,” Per Nykrog discusses how the spread of texts in the twelfth century altered the commerce of ideas and the role of stories. Defining “literary fiction,” he writes, “Literary should be used in the sense ‘essentially in writing’ (as opposed to oral); fiction should be used in the sense of ‘narrative acknowledged by narrator and by public essentially as a product of creative imagination’” (593). Nykrog’s observation matters in this context because, in the twelfth century, written material, “almost exclusively Latin, is reserved for scholarly (ecclesiastical, administrative) uses, and is thus restricted to the pursuit or propagation of what is considered and presented as truth (including traditional narrative)” (593). That distinction is crucial because of its hierarchy—written language has a political truth value during the twelfth century that the spoken word does not. The distinction between valuable language—written Latin and the oral vulgate—transfers to written language as distinctions between meaningful writing and meaningless writing begin to come about. That structural hierarchy lies behind the common contrast between literary and genre.

As Western cultures secularized during and after the Protestant Reformation, separating themselves from a religious system that honored the decisions of the Pope, European cultures created intellectual hierarchies that could replace religious hierarchies. In his book The Meaning of Literature, Timothy Reiss discusses how writers and critics prior to and during the rise of the novel in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw themselves as shapers of the culture who brought dissolute ideas to coherence: “This conception of the literary man was . . . bound to a particular idea and function of state authority” (90). The “improvement of writing” and “the stabilizing of civil society” were seen as parallel acts (77). Denis Diderot in France, and John Dennis and Samuel Johnson in England, helped develop “the modern concept of literature . . .
with a professional and semiprofessional criticism” (229). That establishment of a body of writers noting the worth of literature by inscribing its value on the page mirrors the establishment of the church through written commentaries and the institution of Latin as scholarly language.

That this creation of the idea of literature coincides with the rise of the novel contributes, I think, to the power of the term *literary fiction* today. In the seventeenth century, the most culturally valuable poetic mode for literary arbiters was the epic, and many critics saw the novel as the prose outgrowth of the epic. Reiss writes, “The assimilation of novel to epic (*some* novels) was made quite early. The importance of this cannot be overstressed, because in all discussions of poetry, epic was—and continued to be—treated, with tragedy, as the highest form of literary art” (233). That distinction helped create the idea of a literature to be valued (literary fiction) and one to be denigrated (popular fiction). Note Reiss’ parenthetical emphasis that “*some* novels” were categorized as prose epics, those novels that the literary arbiters judged valuable. Critics already begin to discriminate between those novels worthy of sustained attention and those not; given the “very limited distribution of literary” that Ian Watt notes, that distinction would have been relatively easy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (37).

But the most important change in the practice and study of literature that has likely influenced the term “literary fiction” and its broad purview over the categorization of contemporary American fiction is the professionalization and academicization of the study of literature. In his essay “Popular Fiction and Critical Values: The Novel as a Challenge to Literary History,” Morris Dickstein describes the process by which English departments narrowed the scope of texts worthy of study by excising the popular novel and valuing innovation and novelty. As Dickstein relates, the rise of modernism and its tenets coincided with the establishment and rise of English departments. Gerald Graff dates the “turning point for the consolidation of
criticism in the university” to the years 1937-1941 (152), and Dickstein uses as his starting point for analysis the second edition of Robert Spiller’s *Literary History of the United States*, to which such critics as F. O. Matthiessen contributed. The problem of that major text, Dickstein notes, is that “the more vigorous the discrimination [between worthy and unworthy texts], the more limited the canon of accepted works is likely to be, and the more skewed the literary history may become” (33). The affection such critics as Matthiessen and Spiller felt for modernism led to an emphasis on the individual and innovation, as well as the emphasis on the psychology of characters crucial to definitions of *literary fiction*.

Dickstein also notes the role of the marketplace in determining what texts achieve some value and how. As eighteenth-century England shifted from “the conservative patronage system to the needs of the marketplace,” literary products needed to be differentiated from one another to become noted (34). “For reasons that also relate to the marketplace,” on the other hand, “popular art is often more conservative than vanguard art, wary of drastic innovation, given to repeating formulas which have worked in the past” (35). Though the marketplace seems to work for both arguments—the marketplace both encourages and discourages innovation—capitalist commerce leads often to niche markets, in which certain products are useful to a certain segment of the population and not to others. In the 1930s and ’40s, the university became one such niche marketplace. Dickstein writes, “In the hands of Percy Lubbock and the academic critics who came after him, James’s critical prefaces were turned into rules of craft that made ‘creative writing’ less creative and more teachable, rules that the best novelists had usually felt free to ignore” (40). Despite Dickstein’s use of scare quotes around “creative writing,” he accurately notes the adaptation of James’s aesthetic statements into a set of teachable rules. James’s
aesthetic becomes, in part, the benchmark for the teaching of fiction writing. James is not necessarily a bad benchmark, but then again, the history of literature resists single benchmarks.

As for literary fiction, Dickstein writes, “Publishers today may find it convenient to distinguish between popular and literary fiction, but this refers to the size of the audience, not to any absolute formal differences. Most fiction continues to occupy the large middle ground between self-conscious experimentation and the predictable formulas of the best-seller list” (38). Notably, Dickstein’s assertion predates the first publication of Burroway’s Writing Fiction, suggesting that the term had not yet fully become a part of creative-writing discourse.

Given the problematic history and definitions, I think we should excise literary fiction from syllabi and the academy. However, I am not simply proposing that teachers of fiction writing not use these terms; I think the idea of the terms serve a helpful role. In their primary use as referring to character-driven and plot-driven fiction, literary fiction and genre fiction do point in limited ways to relevant distinctions between what texts do and what readers expect. However, these terms need to be replaced with language that describes fiction without being prescriptive. The four I propose are a starting point, subject to modification and adaptation: plot-oriented, character-oriented, form-oriented, and language-oriented.

A plot-oriented text is one that draws the reader’s focus to an external conflict. The term can describe fictions identified by genre, such as horror, in which the characters and/or the readers seek to identify and understand the foreign physical presence threatening the characters’ lives. It can also help describe and categorize a novel such as Richard Russo’s Dickensian Empire Falls, in which the story focuses not only on the character of Miles Roby and his shift from doormat to family defender, but on the series of public and private events that have led to the disintegration of the titular town. Aristotle’s definition of plot as “the ordering of the
incidents” in which “tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life” almost applies here but doesn’t quite (40). Any fiction has an ordering of events, but Aristotle’s emphasis on “action and life” is what matters primarily in plot-oriented texts, the outward events and the sequence of causality between them.

A character-oriented text focuses on the change a character undergoes not in fortune, but in perception, awareness, and/or behavior. The tendency to call literary fiction character-driven seems to have developed after modernist writers explored individual psychology. In such stories, external action often works to serve a character’s emotional or psychological growth (or failure to grow). To paraphrase E. M. Forster, writing during the height of modernism, a round character is one capable of change and surprise (138-9). Such a character does not necessarily change, but that potential for change becomes the orienting question of character-oriented texts. Almost too many examples arise, from John Updike’s oft-anthologized epiphanic story “A & P,” in which an adolescent boy learns a difficult lesson about maturity and responsibility, to all of Alice Munro’s stories, to even George Saunders.

Formal-oriented texts rely on the conventions of genre (including genre fiction as well as such genres as the coming-of-age story) either as formula or in order to alter or parody the blueprint. Much fiction classified as genre fiction would fit in this category, as would texts such as Barthelme’s The Dead Father. This category makes odd bedfellows, engaging the formulaic (Danielle Steel, John Grisham) with the postmodern (Ishmael Reed, David Foster Wallace). Most crucial to this category in the academy are fictions that question the very form of fiction and the functions of language; thus, postmodern pastiche often seems form-oriented. From Rick Moody’s use of mix-tape notes in his story “Wilkie Fahnstock: The Boxed Set, to Mark Z.
Danielewski’s incorporation of filmic (and Lawrence Sterne-esque) techniques in the *House of Leaves*, this category has broad borders.

Of the categories I’ve established, the category of *language-oriented* texts is likely the broadest one. These are fictions that, through their use of language, require the reader to consider stylistics as the primary element of the story. Burroway claims that much *genre fiction* employs language that is meant to be in some way transparent and bears little looking into by readers. To a certain degree, I agree with that claim (hard-boiled *noirs* are one exception), and I would extend it to some so-called literary fiction where the language seems deemphasized. Obviously, prose fiction is *language-oriented* in the same way oil painting is brushstroke-oriented; from Picasso and Max Beckmann down to public television painting teacher Bob Ross, all painters have to use different kinds of brushstrokes. That said, the degree and way to which stories are *language-oriented* both differ. Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* is *language-oriented* in that the prose style is self-consciously complex and luxuriating: the pedophilic narrator Humbert Humbert says of his writing on his first page, “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9). Ernest Hemingway’s fiction, however, is *language-oriented* in a different way: his spare prose in “Hills Like White Elephants,” the most anthologized example, requires the reader’s closest attention since neither the characters nor the narrator says outright what subject is under discussion between the two central characters, abortion.

A crucial element of the categories I have created is that they are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are open. A fiction can be both *plot-oriented* and *character-oriented*; what a reader emphasizes may make a text seem one more than the other. Also, in some sense, every text is *character-oriented* inasmuch as it has characters; however, there are also texts such as the “Time Passing” section of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, in which no characters appear, though
some are mentioned. Raymond Carver’s stories, for example, are more character- and language-oriented than much fiction, but that does not mean the stories reflect no interest in plot. In fact, the de-emphasis on traditional plot draws attention to how plot functions. Still, the overriding interests most readers find in his stories relate to characterization and style; essays on Carver and textbooks focus on the sparse language and its repetitions of colloquialisms, and on the dynamics of his characters. Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” on the other hand, asks readers to focus on the form of the story with its included letter and formulaic elements from other suspense stories. Comparing those two writers in those terms does not value one over the other, as literary and genre would but allows a discussion of how writers engage similar interests through different means.

Also, note that the terms I use are already used in the fiction-writing classroom. We teach students to understand how plots operate, what form or genre they take, who the characters are and how they change, and what language writers employ to create their stories. I have also chosen pre-existing terminology primarily because it allows teachers to easily adapt to descriptive terminology. Also, rather than “plot-driven” and “character-driven,” terms used frequently in book reviews (and Burroway’s textbook), I employ the metaphor of orientation. “Driven” refers simply to the movement from beginning to end for a reader, what keeps someone reading a text. Orientation refers not only to the expectations a reader orients herself to a text with, but also to how a reader continually either relies upon or alters that orientation during the reading experience.

While these categories replace much of what one loses by excising literary fiction, they do not address a crucial function of the term: establishing what teachers mean by quality. If a form-oriented text could include Donald Barthelme and Danielle Steel, how can teachers use
these terms to restrict students to writing quality fiction? I think there are several already in place for teachers. Earlier I quoted from John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction* to demonstrate that genre is crucial to any fiction. However, in the preface, he distinguishes between what he calls *serious* and *junk* fiction in a way similar to elements of Burroway’s definition. He writes:

The instruction here is not for every kind of writer—not for the writer of nurse books or thrillers or porno or the cheaper sort of sci-fi—though it is true that what holds for the most serious kind of fiction will generally hold for junk fiction as well. (Not everyone is capable of writing junk fiction: It requires an authentic junk mind. Most creative-writing teachers have had the experience of occasionally helping to produce, by accident, a pornographer. The most elegant techniques in the world, filtered through a junk mind, become elegant junk techniques.) What is said here, whatever use it may be to others, is said for the elite; that is, for serious literary artists. (x)

Though Gardner doesn’t clearly define *serious* fiction, the offhand way in which he uses *serious* throughout the preface suggests he assumes his readers will understand what he means. Indeed, his first sentence reads, “This is a book designed to teach the serious beginning writer the art of fiction” (ix). For Gardner, seriousness is a crucial metric, one already clear to him and, presumably, clear throughout his book.

In the way he uses *serious*, Gardner offers few clues to the young writer (though his book as a whole presents many), but the way he employs *serious* does suggest how teachers of writing can define quality for students. Not only does Gardner assume that what he means by *serious* is clear, he presents examples of fiction throughout. The texts and writers he presents—among them Tolstoy, Austen, Calvino, and Twain—suggest the first way to define quality for students: by *consensus* in the field. The marketplace skews toward fiction that sells, but teachers can point
to areas of the marketplace that often serve as barometers of what the field deems as quality: anthologies, be they yearly (Best American Short Stories) or singular (The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction); literary magazines, both long-established (The Southern Review, The Iowa Review) and newer (Post Road, Tin House); and publishers (Vintage, NYRB).

Consensus certainly has its shortcomings. For example, critical opinion, both of individuals and the larger field, changes over time. Acknowledging that chronological change, as well as the limits of individual taste, allows students to see the particular qualities of fiction presented in the classroom within a broader context. Neither the classroom nor a program can present an exhaustive introduction to quality fiction, but teachers can point to commonalities, prevalence of specific detail and unique form among them. Some of these commonalities will vary among teachers; those who teach the stories of Lydia Davis, for example, must discuss the frequent absence of characters in her short work and the ways in which she constructs them when they appear. While there are disagreements within the field, the broad consensus presents one guide to demonstrating quality to students.

The second way to define quality for students is to define it as descriptive, not predictive. Neither individual teachers nor the consensus of the field can accurately predict what fiction will be taught in the future; teachers can only present recent or older work based on their own judgment and the consensus that led to publication. Some students may interpret descriptive, not predictive as a way to ignore the advice of the workshop and/or teacher about their own work, but that misinterpretation can be easily clarified: work in front of the class, be it published or student fiction, is something about which workshop members can apply clear terminology, as well as their own taste and judgment. Ideally, the most concrete, clear responses will win the day, so to speak.
The final way to define quality for students is for teachers to acknowledge that taste and judgment are both distinct and overlapping. One can acknowledge that a story one does not like has good elements, and one can also acknowledge that one’s own taste is not for many other readers in some cases. What builds taste and judgment is *time and experience reading*, one of the principle goals of the writing workshop. Teachers bring experience as writers, workshoppers, editors, and readers that demonstrates judgment and taste for students. Acknowledging one’s blind spots as a teacher is important, but it does not damage severely the authority the teacher presents.
Bibliography


