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RUBRUM

by Keith Eldred

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

Guys used to come around Evan's garage, where he lived alone and rebuilt transmissions alone, to try to draw him into things: softball, cards, fishing, drinks. He wouldn't even grunt at the details. Those guys finally gave up on him. Evan's dead were more alive to him than they were.

Evan thought about everything that his dead did and did not do. They did not lie in their graves and look and listen. He would think this while lying flat on his bed staring up, hands by his sides in coffin-straight lines.

Evan had no reason to live other than that it was what you did. He certainly didn't live to restore transmissions. It was just something that he could do, and do well. He didn't need the money. He spent next to nothing, so his savings just kept mounting in his bank account. Then his nephew the lawyer offered to invest some of it for him, and it grew yet more. The monthly statements started to become obscene.

"Don't you want to spend any of it, Evan?" the boy said.

No, he didn't. He'd spent what he wanted to.

Evan still thought of his nephew as the boy, even though he was not only a lawyer but married. He had trained the boy (when he actually was a boy) not to call him "Uncle Evan" by not responding when "Uncle" was included.

The boy's name was Richard, and he went by Rick, but Evan still thought of him as Ricky. Not that he actually used the boy's name, but the name that he didn't use was Ricky, not Rick.

Sometimes Evan lost track of how he had begun to rebuild transmissions in the first place. How had it happened?

His father had worked on cars. That had been his living. Their living. If you could use the word living for their existence. Their continuing from one day to the next, working trapped together until sleeping again.

This garage that Evan owned had been his father's. Outside on framed boards above the upward-sliding sectioned door, in big blocky faded letters that had only ever been painted once, was their last name: EASTER. The apartment upstairs was where he had grown up with his father. Just the two of them. His mother, well ...

His mother. After all these years, Evan still didn't know how to think about her. He remembered her. Not how she looked. He remembered leaning against her. She was sitting in a chair. He would have been a toddler, only as tall as her knee, or not even. The whole length of him was against her leg, tipping into her. His strongest impression of her leg was that it wasn't his father's leg. His father's leg would have been higher, bigger, thicker, like a pillar, and he wouldn't have touched it, not ever. But his mother's leg ...

He might compare it to a young tree, strong but yielding, accepting his lean. And her light touch on his back, wanting him there. Jake, his father, had wanted him on hand only the way that he wanted his hydraulic lift, because it was a need for the work. The difference was that Jake hadn't despised the lift. He hadn't taken out his rage on the lift. He had reason not to: The lift had value, and it couldn't heal from injury. Unlike Evan.

Grown hulk that he was, Evan felt how wrong it was to lean against his mother's leg in his mind. He didn't take himself there, he actively tried not to. But he found himself there again and again.

Evan didn't even spend money to heat the garage. That just attracted laggards. He finally realized that the thermostat was his salvation one winter day when he got so lost in thought and work that he simply forgot to turn up the gas furnace. He didn't notice how cold it was until That Idiot Ross stopped in and commented on it with extremes of contradiction: "Blazes, man, it's freezin' in here!"

Ross went on blathering clouds of breath while Evan was warmed by this light bulb moment. No heat, no visitors. Hallelujah.

Evan came to rely more and more on his senses of touch and hearing while working on the transmissions. He was genuinely convinced that one day he'd be able to complete a rebuild blindfolded. He even had the blindfold ready—an old handkerchief that had bound its share of his wounds at the hands of his father. There were blood stains amid the black-and-paisley pattern.

The colder it was in the garage, the sharper the air and the better Evan heard the clacks that helped distinguish the metal parts. And the less he heard the other sounds in his mind.

As he worked toward working blind, Evan also stopped using lights. That choice seemed obvious after the fact, but as with forgetting to use the furnace, he had to stumble into it. When his flickering fluorescent tube finally gave up the ghost, he just left it dead in the fixture, so the garage would start to dim in late afternoon. That had been the most likely time for visitors: idlers like That Idiot Ross, Mormons spreading the Word, kids on fundraising rounds. When he started letting the garage go dark on top of providing no heat in the winter nor cooling in the summer, the flow of unwanted traffic trickled dry, and he was left alone to work.

Evan was as alone as could be. He would lie on his bed and think that and then realize that it wasn't true. He wasn't a castaway on an island, not an inmate in solitary, not a guru atop a mountain. Just imagine never seeing anyone. Never being able to. Never having to.

And if no one had to see him ... so much the better. The world didn't need him. The transmissions could go elsewhere. They wouldn't be fixed as well nor as quickly, if he did say. He did one rebuild a day, every day, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays included. So the shop owners who jobbed out to him might miss him, briefly. But soon enough, they'd forget him. Everyone would. As it should be. No loss.

Evan did need to venture outside the garage at times, for food and the occasional pair of new underwear. There were no elves to bring him supplies.

And some appointments he could not escape. Ricky, his lawyer nephew Rick, had come to keep a calendar for him. Ricky was the only person that Evan ever saw anymore, aside from shop owners and UPS drivers who dropped off parts, and the tool truck guy who came around once a month to see what he might need. Ricky was a take-charge guy—that's what had gotten him through law school—and he had more or less appointed himself Evan's caretaker.

"You ever see a dentist, Evan?" Ricky asked one day.

Evan held still, knowing what had prompted the question. His breath smelled.

He had just released a sigh, letting it puff out his mouth and flutter his lips, and there had been good reason for it. Ricky had asked, "Your buddy Ross ever come around anymore?"

Pfft, his buddy Ross. The proper title was That Idiot Ross. Surely everyone thought so. The guy had no job, he just flitted between gathering spots—the convenience store, the library, the doughnut shop, anyplace with captives behind counters or in line in front of them. He never shut up spouting conspiracy theories.

His buddy Ross? The only possible response was a breathy sigh of objection. Which made Ricky flinch and ask his question. “You ever see a dentist?”

Mmg. Evan gave the slightest shake of his head.

“No, you never see a dentist,” Ricky said, “or no, you don’t want to? Or both?”

Mmg.

“You’re gonna see a dentist, Evan,” Ricky said.

Evan was about to open his mouth and object, but ... his breath. And what was the use? Ricky would not be denied.

So Ricky started making appointments for Evan: Dentist, doctor, haircuts ...

Well, not haircuts. Evan saw a way out of those. During one session reviewing his calendar (His calendar. The thought made Evan roll his eyes. But there it was in the flesh—er, paper—on his wall, where Ricky made notes in handwriting wholly unworthy of a Juris Doctor)... during one review of his calendar, Ricky said that he was overdue for a haircut, and Evan was prepared.

He produced a pair of scissors and handed them over with a gesture that said, “Let’s go right now. Cut my hair.”

“Oh no,” Ricky protested.

Evan waited.

“I know you don’t care how you look, but I have to look at you. Think of me.”

Evan waited.

“Mugh.” The sound meant Ricky refused to barber him.

Evan placed a chair under a drop light and sat with his back to Ricky. A clean drop cloth and a small spring clamp just happened to be in reach.

“Mugh.”

But Ricky swirled the drop cloth around Evan and clamped it in place.

“Fine,” Ricky said.

Uncounted awkward snips later, Ricky paused to inspect his work.

“Mugh. Worst. Haircut. Ever.”

On the contrary, this snipping had saved Evan a trip outside. BEST. Haircut. Ever.

There was something Ricky didn’t know. Something he would have been shocked to learn. Something completely at odds with the rest of Evan’s life.

It was this: Evan never, ever left his apartment and the garage voluntarily. Except ... he did. About once a month. For no good reason. Unless you called a midnight snack a good reason. A midnight snack that would actually be consumed between 1 and 3 a.m. A snack that involved walking four miles round trip.

Up the road to the Sheetz convenience store and back.

CHAPTER 2

Evan himself was astonished that he had this secret. He could not trace its beginning.

Growing up where he did, everyone went to Sheetz convenience stores, “everyone” being a jot short of absolute truth. No one said “Sheetz convenience store,” they just went to Sheetz. It was the name of the family that founded and still ran the chain of hundreds of locations. Sheetz was the region’s answer to 7-11. There was one every few miles, or so it seemed, each open round the clock for gas and food, a traveler’s delight and a mainstay for locals to fuel vehicle and body.

And spirit? A Sheetz store was a colorful crossroads cultivating camaraderie among all who passed through its height-markered, never-locked doors. The typical site was well-lit, scrupulously cleaned (excepting the busiest of the travel meccas, ahem) and artfully designed with frequent remodels. It featured an expansive layout lushly landscaped and pop-soundtracked with premium speakers. It was somehow family-friendly while also offering cigarettes by the case, lottery tickets by the ream and unmentionable publications by the, uh, shameful, peeking from the top reaches of the magazine racks. The worst of foods were smack by the best: Powdered doughnuts, grilled chicken salad, jerky bites, protein smoothies, vats of nacho cheese across from bundles of low-fat string. Smiling crews in sporty uniforms button-flaired the newest drink-sandwich-combo-special-innovation.

Sheetz mounted naughty ad campaigns such as the one for the meatball sub (“Grab life by the you-know-what”) and the one for the chicken tenders (“Strip joint ahead”). This edginess was offset by ubiquitous sponsorship of community events, poster-quality ads appearing in every program, whether for kindergarten play or poker run. In its neighborhoods, Sheetz caused three acute conditions: awareness, affection and antipathy. The first was a universal affliction, the latter a rare malady.

Evan was like (very nearly) everyone else around him. He had been a lifelong customer of Sheetz. But only for gasoline, and his stops were rare because he did so little driving.

His affection for Sheetz surged when the chain became an early adopter of pay-at-the-pump. It was like a waking dream, that first time he had noticed someone on the other side of his pump swipe her credit card, pump gas and simply drive away. It made the sun rise in the dark night of his soul. No more having to talk to anyone? This changed everything.

When he pulled in moments earlier, Evan’s stomach had clenched at what he had expected to have to do after the pump was turned on for him and he finished filling up: He would replace the nozzle, grimly twist his fuel cap back on, swallow hard, then gravely turn toward the store. He would march as if to his own hanging, dreading an awkward moment at the door with someone’s holding it open for him, perhaps saying, “There ya go, Buddy.” Or he might realize too late that he should have held the door for someone else. He was still haunted by the time he happened to look back just as the door shut behind him, through the glass at the glare of a woman holding a newborn with one hand and clamping the wrists of two toddlers in the other. He would be forced to grunt replies to a clerk’s chirping questions: “How ya doin’ today?” “Where were you, Pump 4?”

But now ... there was the miracle of pay-at-the-pump. It made Evan weak in the knees. Now he could go to Sheetz ... without going to Sheetz. Finally, this was actual, complete self-service gasoline. Was that pinprick at the corner of his eye ... a tear?

So how could it be, mere months into the Pay-at-the-Pump Era, that he found himself waking up from a dead sleep flooded with desire for ... what? What???

A birthday-cake crème drink from Sheetz?

Evan saw the Sheetz posters and billboards in his mind as surely as if they were projected in the dark above his bed. The Birthday Cake Batter Creamz, Sheetz called this drink. The vivid image showed something like a milkshake, a frothing of milk, ice, air and, yes, birthday cake batter.

Even as all of this made Evan shudder, the thought of cake batter brought his mother to mind. Mothers bake cakes, right? Maybe fathers, too, but ... his mother. She would have baked him a birthday cake. One during each of the few years that she was with him in the apartment over the garage. He couldn't remember any of them, but he clung to a certainty of these cakes and the tiny celebrations around them. At the same time, he couldn't conceive of his father's even eating cake, much less baking a cake, much less baking a cake for him. Evan's father didn't belong in the same universe with cake.

No, not quite true.

Evan flashed on a memory of a plastic-wrapped pack of cakes—Twinkies, something like that—slapping him in the chest and falling to the floor. This happened in a Sheetz store, sometime during his later grade school years.

The Twinkies pack struck him before he saw it coming, and he couldn't react quickly enough to catch it. He tried, letting himself drop after it as if to overtake time. His father came

down on mistakes, and he would surely see this as a mistake. If the package burst, they would have to buy it, and surely his father hadn't meant to buy it. Or Evan would have to hide it on the rack behind the other cakes. Whatever he did, it would be wrong, and he could feel them coming: blows from his father, at home and in the truck, and a rough you-should-know-better grab on the arm while they were still in the store.

Along with the pack of cakes his father also flung words at him like knives. "Happy birthday, kid."

His mind clawed at the words. It wasn't his birthday. Does Dad not know my birthday? No, he knew. Or at least he knew that this date was not Evan's birthday. It was only a joke. These thoughts blurred with Evan's motion as he scooped up the pack and straightened to tuck it behind its clean mates on the snack rack.

The speed of this correction caught his father off guard. A beat passed before Jake sneered, "No, really, kid, take 'em, we'll get 'em. I'll split 'em with ya."

Evan hated that even the thought of this non-gift from his father brought a surge of feeling that propelled his hand again, now retrieving the mashed pack from its hiding place.

His father struck it from his grasp. "Not that one! I said we'd split it. You want me to have that mushed thing? Hell!" The pack hit the floor again, the package finally splitting.

This time, with hard-won reflex, Evan had not dropped to the floor, because now he was squared off against his father. He would have ducked into line with Jake's boot.

"Pick it up!" the order came. Evan did so, twisting to guard against a kick. In a small favor from the universe, the split package came up cleanly, the rupture on top held shut by Evan's pinch.

"Buy it," his father growled, stepping past him and out the door.

Evan froze. He had no money. His mind raced. Toss the pack in the trash and flee? Or ... ?

Just then he felt a tug on one breast pocket. Time slowed as a hand withdrew from the pocket, leaving behind folded dollar bills.

Now Evan perceived the arm with the hand, the body with the arm, a tall figure striding past. A gray and black uniform. It was a town police officer, coffee that he'd already paid for in one hand. He flowed on out the door.

The officer didn't confront Evan's father. He just got in his cruiser and drove off. Evan never did see the man's face.

The boy Evan paid for the split pack of cakes that day, and the grown Evan with the transmission shop ... he never charged for work on a town police cruiser, and he never would.

Evan mightily resisted the Creamz Dreamz (a term that made him squirm ... imagine if That Idiot Ross somehow found out about this.) He closed his eyes against the visions of the Sheetz ads for Birthday Cake Batter Creamz, but they persisted inside his eyelids, the colors all the brighter against the black.

He rolled left in his bed. He rolled right. The Sheetz posters and billboards (Posterz, Billboardz) followed.

Left. Right. Left. R—

Enough. He got out of bed. Not to go to Sheetz, to go to work. He might as well. There would be no sleep for him.

He thought about making this the night when he actually would work blind, as he had aspired. He had history now of using his blindfold in small experiments, here tightening a screw, there joining two parts by feel.

So why not tonight? It was pitch dark. Yes, he would work without lights.

He started ... by turning on a light. In his room, to find his clothes. He chose his ball cap with small lights built into the brim. He'd start with that as his only illumination. Then he'd reach a point in the current transmission job when he could switch off the hat and perform the next step in darkness. He'd switch the hat on as needed. Baby steps. Yes, now was the time to try it.

Ross would make fun of that, too, if he knew—his working blind. Evan could imagine him going on about it. But why worry about someone who didn't even know the meaning of working in daylight?

Heading down the stairs to the garage, Evan remembered that the Birthday Cake Batter Creamz was driving him to this, and he realized he hadn't thought of the drink for several min-

utes. Good. He set about losing the vision of it again by focusing on his work. The steps creaked under foot as he walked down into the shop, angling his hat to light his way, like a coal miner with a head lamp descending into the earth.

Evan's fatigue caught up with him as he submerged into the darkness of the garage—not a good way to enter into his experiment of working blind. As quickly as the thought had compelled him, his interest had evaporated. Sleep beckoned him now, his reserve of energy dwindling with each step. He was lighting a cramped, ugly stairwell, and that was all. How pathetic. He didn't feel like going down, he didn't feel like going back up.

He went down.

He sat on the bottom step, meaning to ease onto it but misjudging in his grogginess and thudding down, the lip of the rising tread digging into his back. His cap illuminated every poor feature of his shop. He clicked it off.

Minutes before, he had been asleep. Now he was dressed and seated at the bottom of his steps in the dark, sad and depleted.

The old building always creaked. Evan would listen to it in bed, moving and speaking but going nowhere and saying nothing. Rain, wind, passing traffic, a beep from a piece of electrical equipment, scuttlings on the roof or sometimes inside: mice, squirrels. The whap of a bird misjudging and flying into the building. Sounds.

Evan sat at the bottom of the steps now, not actively listening, but with sounds coming to him. He could get up and work blind. Is that what he did anyway, lights or no lights, eyes open or closed? Work blind? What for? To keep cars running? To hear an engine make a proper sound and do the proper thing? That must be his proper thing, working on cars. His proper thing: Being

alone with neither light nor heat. He was like the building around him, letting the world act on him, moving, making sounds, a constructed presence appearing alive.

It was the sounds of the building that finally got to Evan that night. The speaking that said nothing but never, ever shut up. It reminded him of something he had heard from one of the low-lives who used to hang around his garage, an ex-con. "That's the thing about the slam," he said. "The noise never stops, not for one second. There's no such thing as silence. There's always someone talkin' or moanin' or yellin' or walkin' or clickin' or some damn thing. You hear all o' those at the same time, night n' day. You get to where you don't notice it. It all just blends together like you live next to a waterfall. No, you're right IN the waterfall. It's always fallin' like rain, the noise."

In the dark, with nothing to see, all Evan heard was noise falling. He knew what he would do.

He turned on the lights of his cap and crossed to a cabinet on the wall that held solvents. He reached up on the top and felt—ACK, what was that? Fur? A rat?? He yanked his hand back so quickly that he scraped his wrist on a metal edge. It grabbed at him and slashed pain toward his palm. There was no question that it would well up with blood.

Evan raised his cap and saw mites and motes filling its light beams and realized that he hadn't felt fur. It was thick dust that had collected into a blanket on top of the cabinet. No wonder, since he never cleaned up there. This was in contrast to his regular cleanings of the rest of the shop. He liked things orderly. But something had kept him away from the top of that cabinet.

He went to the sink and washed and treated and bandaged his cut from a there. He turned to the cabinet again and this time dragged over a stool to stand on so he could see the top. Yikes, the dust. There was a quilt of it except where his swipe had plowed a track into the fuzz. He had

been aiming for something stored up there but had missed it by a good arm length. He still couldn't actually see it yet, only a plateau of dust rising where it was buried.

He reached for it, his fingers closing through the froth of dust until they met its hard shape. He picked it up, felt the solid weight, and anticipated that a snake of dust—its power cord—would trail behind it and finally swing free, the plug end a pendulum spewing particles. He turned his head against this flurry and held his fuzzy prize out and away until he had it over at his air hose to blow it clean.

Would it still work? A radio that had been covered in that much dust, silent for years? Evan located a microfiber cloth and wiped the radio further, his work serving to highlight the grime remaining in crevices.

He plugged in the radio and was surprised at the instant glowing of a dot of red in the casing. There was the faintest pulse and hum of electrical resistance. An Igor voice (though Evan couldn't recall how he knew this was an Igor voice) came to his mind: "It's alive!" There was no broadcast sound yet, but Evan found the knob for tuning and turned it.

There was a crackle.

Evan turned the knob farther, inviting a staticky garble of reception. The radio worked. Evan turned past the snaps and pops, pulled in the ghost of a man's voice, a snatch of guitar, random sounds.

And then it went crystal clear with a woman's voice.

No. It couldn't be ... her.

It was a small voice, with no edges. But for Evan it held all the music of the world.

He was in the garage no longer. He wasn't anywhere now. The world was only that voice, talking about music, introducing a classical piece. He didn't register that until he heard the lilt of a string quartet in place of the speaking.

She was gone. Now the world was only her absence, a colossal void and prison.

The whiplash of this jolted Evan with his own sorry state: A disheveled, dirty mechanic with a fresh bandage sitting on a scarred stool in a grimy garage in the dark of night listening to an ornate composition. All of this spookily lit by beams from his scuffed hat. Nothing was right with this, and it overwhelmed Evan with sadness.

Then the damnable Sheetz Birthday Cake Batter Creamz popped back into his mind.

That. Was. It.

He shut the radio and headed straight toward the door.

He was going to Sheetz.

CHAPTER 3

Evan burst from the garage and was soon crunching his way down the side of the road toward the store, two miles distant. His grogginess was gone. He was awake to his doing this, placing fast footfalls to get to Sheetz.

There was a gorgeousness to the night. The air had a chill snap that moved about him liquidly. The stars were white sand scattered on black velvet.

Evan recognized that he was not supposed to be out here. He never left the garage without having to, never walked anywhere. Yet here he was stomping to Sheetz in the wee hours to buy a foolish drink.

Was he actually going to buy that Creamz drink? And drink it? He could feel himself recoil against each stage that would take him toward putting the straw to his lips. His mind carried him ahead to the point where the glow of the store lights would breach the horizon, then grow brighter until he would see the first sign of the store complex, the tallest point, the lit-from-below-glow of the red canopy over the gas pumps. Then he would see the store building itself, a crisp, artfully-bricked mass that would rapidly swell as he approached. Then he would see the tableau of the whole property on the concrete parking lot. There would be a scattering of cars, and even nearing 2 am, there would be customers. He would not be the only one roaming the earth at the wrong hour.

He marveled at the scenes projected forward in his mind: His stepping from the shadows into the warm zone of illumination. He watched himself approach the store, enter the lobby, grasp the final door handle and step inside.

He didn't note what he wasn't picturing: Any interactions with those other customers or with staff. There was no one he had to negotiate against as he made his way to an ordering kiosk. He could see his thick forefinger stabbing the vivid computer screen, tapping through the choices—Small, Medium, Large (he would pick Medium) and the other choices: Skim or Whole Milk, Whipped Cream on top or not. Then would come the fateful moment of no return, his tap that would place the order, a moment that always brushed him with the bristles of decision.

In his throat was something like a bubble of compulsion. Indeed he would be ordering this silly concoction.

If he made that final tap on the screen, his order number would appear on the kiosk, and at its side the tiny printer would whirl and advance his order slip with its neat lines of information. In his meaty hand the slip of paper would be a small but stinging note of commitment because it would mean next going to the counter to pay.

Here a person finally came into his reverie. The luck-of-the-draw moment when the roulette wheel of staff would rotate an employee toward him. Every store had a range of types, so there was no telling who he would confront: old, young, male, female, large, tiny, energetic, understated. Overall, there was a reliable friendly attentiveness to Sheetz employees, but each was a threat simply for being a person who would speak to him and force decisions and knowingly or unknowingly craft points of interaction.

That was the dread for him, the exchange with the clerk. If only he could not only place his order but pay for it without also paying the price of interplay. If only pay-at-the-pump for

gasoline would be answered by pay-at-the-kiosk for your food or drink order. If only he could feed his credit card to the machine and be served without exchanging a word.

Oh no. His credit card.

He suddenly realized that he didn't have it with him. Nor any bills or coins.

He had moved all the way through the steps in his mind to find himself at the ordering kiosk in actuality, with the dreaded commitment slip in his hand. Yet in his hot haste to leave the garage, he had never thought of pocketing his wallet.

He looked at his order number. What ... ? Was this a malfunction of the machine? But no, the printing was dark and clear. That really was his order number.

Zero-Zero-Zero. #000.

Evan felt the flush and prickle of sudden sweat. He thought about slinking away and abandoning his order. But no, he wouldn't do that.

Lord he would hate to, but he had to ask an employee in the food prep area to cancel his order. The small galley was open for viewing, a deliberate touch made to increase confidence in orders. Evan made a flinch toward doing this, but he could not bring himself to interrupt the workers weaving around each other. There was a flickering upward of the order slip in his hand, and words twitched their way toward his thick tongue.

Just then: Whomp. A hand clapped with undue force onto his shoulder. With it, there was braying in his ear: "Evan Easter, watch your keister!"

Ah, no. That Idiot Ross.

Evan kept his head still but closed his eyes. Which made it all the easier, he realized too late, for Ross to snatch the order slip from his hand. Evan's reflexes were quick enough that his fingers closed on the paper as it moved, so that it tore and Evan retained a scrap.

Ross skipped a step away and squinted at his part of the slip. He announced for all to hear: “Birthday Cake Batter Creamz, Large!”

Large? In his trance of ordering, it had been a Medium. Evan had spent even more of the money that he hadn’t brought than he had thought.

“Where is it?” Ross lofted the question over the counter. “Birthday Cake Batter Creamz! We need that out here now! Evan Easter waits for no man!”

This made the heads of two waifish Sheetz staffers raise their heads from prepping orders, eyes widening like startled does behind a hedge. Ross added, “Evan waits for no girl, neither!”

One of the waifs raised her hand, bringing a tall cup into view. With an official come-hither-for-your-order tone, she said, “Number Zero Zero Zero, ready for payment.”

“Ooh, ya scored a Triple-Zero!” That Idiot Ross said. Multiple Sheetz workers chimed in: “Triple Zero!” “Cool!” “Nice!”

What was this now? Evan lifted his gaze to the Pickup Spot where the two Sheetz girls were conferring. Both wore Sheetz ball caps, their ponytails snaking out the back. He picked up their conversation in progress.

“—iple Zero on an order slip means you get it free,” one explained to the other. “It’s a new thing.”

The pixie with the drink raised it higher for Evan to see. “Oops, not Ready for Payment, Ready for Pickup. No charge.”

“Luckyyyy,” said Ross. “Whadya ever do to deserve that?”

Evan moved to take the drink.

“Sorry I messed up,” the girl said. “When I said payment.”

Evan shook his head at this and nodded his thanks. He was just relieved that he hadn't had to speak up. The girl had no idea how relieved. So greatly that he actually looked her in the eye, and for him it was something like looking at the sun. His mind flashed on another blond girl years in his past. The shock of this stalled his hand.

Puzzled briefly, the girl moved the drink to Evan's hand herself. The chill surface of the cup helped bring him around, as well as That Idiot Ross's saying once again, "Luckyyyyyy."

As usual, That Idiot Ross babbled at Evan. "What brought YOU outa yer cave? You're the LAST person I'd expect to see out, ANY time o' day, much less at Oh-Dark-Thirty. Get to thinkin' too much about Miss September on one o' your girly calendars there in yer shop, didja?"

Evan left the store without answering, but the ludicrous statement tugged at his mind.

Back before Evan figured out how to drive away lingerers, he had been working alone one day when That Idiot Ross brought in a calendar typical for a garage: Tools on every page, but the women posing with the tools, barely contained in their skimpy outfits—they were the point of the decoration. Ross had even taken it upon himself to slip the calendar onto a nail where Evan already had a calendar hung.

Ross gestured to the current gal of the month. "Huh? Huh?" he said, tongue wagging, eyebrows waggling, hands sliding into a vulgar motion.

Evan straightened from his work, and without a word (naturally), he stepped to a metal trash can and turned over the lid so that it rested on top as a tray. Then he picked up an acetylene torch and lighter, lit the torch, and tuned the flame to a blue point with a white core.

"Oh, no," That Idiot Ross said in a laughing but uncertain challenge. Evan crossed to the new calendar and took it off the nail. He used the torch to light a corner of it and placed it flaming in the upturned trash can lid, driving Ross to say, "Noooooooooo."

Evan ran the flame across the paper to get all of it burning. Then he stepped toward That Idiot Ross void of expression but with the torch still lit.

“Hold on now,” Ross said, backing up. This was the direction that Evan wanted him to go, toward the door. Ross flicked his eyes in its direction, checking that the path to it was clear.

“Come on!” That Idiot Ross said. “You need a calendar like that. What else you got to live for? Tell me what!”

Evan kept advancing with the torch. “You think about it,” That Idiot Ross growled as he bolted outside. Evan shut the door behind him and stood with the torch still burning. That Idiot Ross’s motorcycle rumbled away.

Evan turned off the flame, its airy hiss ending in a sucking sound that left the garage silent save for the usual creakings. Smoke curled up from the char of the paper.

Evan’s father had hung calendars like that in the garage, more than one at a time. They were the first things that Evan burned after Jake's funeral, that time using a steel barrel rather than a trash can lid. He had found lots more of his father’s belongings in the garage—smutty magazines, receipts, remnants of beer packaging, spent lottery tickets—to add to the barrel. He fed them in until the sun came up, gazing at the flames licking above the barrel’s rim.

That had been a decade ago.

Evan carried his drink out of the light that surrounded the store, heading back toward the garage. He poked his straw into the thick, chunked contents of the cup, realized why it had also come with a long spoon, and gathered himself for his first pull on the stiff cold mixture.

CHAPTER 4

There was no going back after that first Creamz drink.

Or rather, exactly the opposite: There was going back. To Sheetz, hours before dawn, at random intervals.

It became monthly, or thereabouts. Sometimes Evan would wake from a dead sleep. Other times, he would find himself dwelling on a particular Sheetz treat during the workday, and ignore it or indulge it, he knew that it was only a matter of time before he would trudge his way after it.

His second midnight ramble followed an afternoon and evening when he simply couldn't get a Sheetz hot dog out of his mind. A doggone fifty-cent hot dog. Of course, it ended up costing in the neighborhood of three dollars after Evan piled it with toppings at extra cost. As tight with a penny as he was, he was glad to pay this price, simply because he thought it better to burn an hour of sleep on something that cost more than fifty cents. It was probably more than an hour, factoring in the walk both ways and the time for indigestion.

The next visit was for a cinnamon pretzel with cream cheese icing. By then, Evan realized that he was going to eat his way through the entire Sheetz menu without repeating. He always remembered to take along his wallet. That first scare had taught him well.

He also figured out how to avoid That Idiot Ross, or at least to greatly decrease the chances of running into him. He knew where That Idiot Ross lived—as did everyone in town because of the conspiracy-themed signs that rimmed his lawn, and because they knew his rattletrap motorcycle, which he kept outdoors year round under an overhang. Ross's house was near the beginning of Evan's two mile walk. There could be no greater strain on the definition of neighbor.

When Evan ventured forth on a Sheetz foray, if the motorcycle of That Idiot Ross was missing from under the overhang, Evan simply turned back. He could ignore his Sheetz compulsion—turn it off like a light switch—if indulging it might mean an encounter with Ross. But if the motorcycle of That Idiot Ross was chained in place, Evan was willing to take the risk.

Or so he thought. After the first time looking over his shoulder for That Idiot Ross, Evan found himself with a better idea as he passed the motorcycle while heading back home. Digging into the dregs of a walking taco, he detoured to take a look at the bike's engine. On his next mid-night trip to Sheetz, it would be nothing to loosen the spark plug wire and then retighten it on his return.

That became his new precaution, his way of buying time and multiplying his chances of being left alone. He imagined that there would eventually be a night when Ross would wake in the wee hours and feel compelled to take a ride, only to find that his motorcycle wouldn't turn over. As rough as the bike always sounded, and from bits of conversation over the years, Evan knew that That Idiot Ross knew nothing about maintaining the engine, so he would be baffled that his bike wouldn't start. And he would be stranded.

The thought made Evan smile—or lifted the dour corners of his mouth as much as anything ever did—every time he found himself on a Sheetz walk. The smile began shortly before, and ended shortly after, the detaching of the sparkplug wires.

So now Evan was a secret midnight snacker. As if that weren't shocking enough, he also had something that had the faintest resemblance to ... a relationship. This does not mean with Ricky. It was a relationship with a woman.

Her name was Sally. So said her name tag. She was the Sheetz employee who he regularly ran into behind the register during his odd middles of nights. He knew her solely from these across-the-counter encounters.

Evan could only suppose that he liked Sally. She was about his age. The first thing to like was that she said absolutely nothing. She only smiled. He always used his credit card to pay, and the swiping station was right in front of him, and he already had his total on his order slip, so there was no need for her to announce his total. He knew that she didn't need to, and she knew that he knew. So she would just smile and hold out a hand for his order slip with its barcode, then pass it over the scanner, and he would swipe his card. She would slide over his receipt, and that was that. He would mosey away to the seating area to wait until his order number was called. He tried not to look in Sally's direction, as he had once done (accidentally?), and she happened to catch his eye. They both looked away, but not before he saw her smile, and not before he felt his face go stiff with mortification.

Now that Evan knew better, he would just sit and stare at the number on his order slip and count up to it, or toward it ... 121, 122, 123 ... Or if it was a low number, he would count to it forward and then backward, repeating as needed ... 14, 15, 16 ... 16, 15, 14 ... Finally, his order

number would be called, and he would cross to the pick-up spot and turn for the exit taking care throughout never to look in Sally's direction.

He started thinking about her on the walk home as he munched or crunched or slurped or spooned or forked whatever he had just bought. Nothing specific, just holding her in his mind. Especially her smile.

On one return trip he realized that he had never checked to see whether Sally wore a wedding ring.

Wedding ring??

A short time ago ... a matter of months, weeks ... he couldn't have dreamed of his wondering whether any particular woman was married.

But ...

Was she ... ?

Then Evan realized that it would be a month or so before a snacking compulsion would drive him back to the store so he could try to sneak a look at Sally's ring finger. It never occurred to him that he could make his own decision to return there at any time of day or night.

But of course, the next time that Evan couldn't repulse his own urge to make a Sheetz run, it turned out to be the first night that Sally wasn't on duty. (Evan realized later that he had thought of her as on duty serving the public good, the same as a nurse or a police officer.) This was impossibly perplexing. How could she not be there?

By the time Evan came to himself, sitting in the seating area, with his receipt and the food that he had bought—a tub of macaroni and cheese topped with chili, a solid warm cylinder weighing down his gaudy green bag—he realized that he must have stepped up to another clerk

with his order slip and that that person must have completed his transaction. He hadn't registered any of that. He had no idea who had waited on him, only that it had not been Sally.

He looked over at the checkout area, where he must have just been standing. That's when he noticed what else he had not noticed. There was a whole new bank of registers that hadn't been in the store the last time he came in. Each of these had a video screen facing out, on the customer side. Each had red dancing laser lines on its horizontal surface.

This Sheetz now had self-checkouts. It was just like pay-at-the-pump, except this was for paying for food and other purchases. Evan could now ring up anything with a barcode—meaning anything in the store—by himself. Under the watchful eye of a friendly employee ready to help, of course, but still—he would be his own clerk. His own Sally.

Evan had nearly wept when he discovered Pay-At-The-Pump at Sheetz, because it let him buy gasoline without (Praise the Lord) any interaction. That had led him to pine for the same thing inside the store—exactly what he was looking at now. His wish had come true. This was as close as he might ever come to going to Sheetz without going to Sheetz. He would have to interact only with the computers.

But now these self-checkouts made him think of Sally. Because never having to talk to anyone was not the same as never having to talk to her.

Evan drew up to the self-checkouts. He watched the red laser lines dance. Text on the screen invited him to scan either his first item or his loyalty card.

Ricky had signed him up for a Sheetz card. He had handed it to Evan and said, "Swipe this before your credit card when you pay at the pump. You think it's good now, wait till you save 3 cents a gallon just for using the card." And that's just what happened. A nice deal.

Evan had his Sheetz card in his breast pocket. Not sure why he was doing it—he had nothing to check out—he reached for it, then held it in place to catch the beams of light. There was a beep and a voice saying, “Loyalty card recognized. Please scan your first item.”

That voice.

It was that same voice from the radio. The same voice that had belonged to ... someone from long ago. Evan had come to avoid letting himself hear her name in his mind. He had closed off the memory. But this was her voice. Again.

He was moving away from the register now, reaching the exit in quick strides. He had to slow down to wait for two college-age kids on their way in. One had an exaggerated limp that seemed to be due to a foot fallen asleep. Both of the boys had faces dull with fatigue. They’d been driving a long time, it came to Evan in a flash, though his mind was whirling. He made his way past them, and the sudden cold grip of the night made him realize that he’d been flushed with heat inside the store.

He kept moving, aiming back toward his garage. His mind was a torrent. Sally wasn’t at the store, but suddenly the self-checkouts were, doing her work. The red scanning lines had moved from her side of the counter to his. He had let them run over his Sheetz card. It now seemed an act of disloyalty, yet the voice had used the term “Loyalty Card.”

And the voice itself. A voice from his past.

No, don’t think about that.

He missed Sally, though she had never said a word to him.

No, don’t think about that. She doesn’t even know your name. You don’t have a name tag like she does.

even though you can do her job now. you can check out your own food. you've become part Sheetz employee. you already pump your own gas. you take your own order at the kiosk. now you can ring up your own order and submit your own payment. you're taking sally's job.

Wait, wait, wait now. I am nothing to her. She is nothing to me.

not true. you like her.

I don't know her. I was going to check whether she had a ring. But I couldn't. She wasn't there.

and there was the voice from the machine. you know that voice. you remember ...

Don't. Don't say her name.

... but you remember. you liked her too, back then. loved her. but now you like Sally. ha. so much for loyalty.

Evan never did eat the food that he brought back from Sheetz. It wasn't until he reached the garage that he found the bag in his hand, the still-faintly-warm tub in the bottom of it. He put it into his refrigerator.

He fished his Sheetz card and credit card from his pocket again and lingered over them before returning them to his wallet. He undressed and got back into bed and looked out the window at stars until suddenly finding himself waking in the gray light of morning. He'd had no dreams.

Now back in his clothes, he opened the refrigerator. There was the red Sheetz bag. He microwaved the tub of pasta and chili for breakfast, removing the lid and stirring it once to finish the heating. He sat with it and was about to insert his fork when his eye fell on the radio. He hadn't turned it on since the night he had heard it produce ... that voice.

The dial seemed to look back at him. He sensed words, from That Voice, being held just behind it. The dial struck him now as a face, featureless save for the one line that would point to “OFF” when the radio was shut. The line had the slightest tilt of questioning, as if asking, “OFF or ON?”

Evan dreaded hearing That Voice again. But neither could he bear the thought of its being as close as one twist of a knob.

He reached out.

... and the oddest thing happened. It was as if he had struck a surface with his knuckles, because there was the sound of a knock. He had ... rapped on an invisible door? He flexed back his wrist. Paused. Moved his knuckles forward ... and there was another knock. He froze.

Then came another knock, and he realized ... it was coming from his door. This was an actual knock.

He looked in that direction, not moving yet, just twisting away from the radio and the food, both untouched. There was more light rapping. He rose now and crossed to the door and opened it.

And he had never seen anything like this ... Light started to stream past the edges of the door as soon as it parted with its frame. Light with unearthly brightness. It was like standing at the top of a lighthouse facing the blazing beam itself. Evan fought against it as if in a swell of water. With his eyes tight shut, the light was still a redness coming through.

He opened his eyes now ... and found himself in his bed. He could not remember ever waking to morning light this bright. Made all the brighter because it glared from the windshield of his own truck.

He furlled back his blanket and sat up on the edge of the bed, shaking his head to clear it.

Then he heard it. Knocking again. Actual knocking. Was it actual this time? Again at his door.

Unlike the earlier knocking, this was heavy and insistent. These were true blows on the door, growing harder.

By the time Evan got into pants, still shoeless, and had made his way to the stairs, the pounding rattled the walls and made the door shake in its frame.

Something wasn't right about this. As he moved, Evan reached for a heavy wrench that would make a good club. Just in case.

He released the deadbolt and pulled the door open.

There was no glaring light this time, only the usual backdrop outside the building.

But in front of it: Impossibility. It was someone who could not be there.

"Am I dead?" Evan thought.

Because the person standing in his doorway certainly was. Evan had discovered his corpse himself, ten years earlier.

It was his father.

PART 2

CHAPTER 5

Her name was Anabelle. An old-fashioned name.

Not everyone knew that was her full first name, because later she shortened it. Evan knew her full name, as well as her middle name and the overly-cute rhyme that it created. She was Anabelle Faye Day.

He knew this because they had been classmates starting in first grade, in the little country school. Only nine others were in their grade, five girls and six boys in all.

Back then, starting in fifth grade, they had square-danced on Fridays after lunch. Their teacher, Mrs. Laurent, put on a record and joined in to make the sixth female for an even number.

The boys put on that they didn't want to dance, that they were above it and participated only to humor Mrs. Laurent and the girls. But their edginess and shoving gave away how nervously eager they were. After clowning through the first awkward go-rounds, they would forget themselves in the circling and hand-over-handing, and they would swing along with flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

Evan, though, sincerely had not wanted to dance. How could it be possible for him, backward as he was in his dingy jeans and grimy boots? And with each of his thick fingers per-

manently smudged with dirt and grease from working in the garage, no matter how he scrubbed his hands, no matter that he wore his mechanic's gloves whenever he could.

He was uneasy about the music as well. Outside of school, he knew music only from the thrashing metal that his father blasted in the garage. He never knew quite what to make of the light, airy songs that they sang at school. Most of the other kids seemed to know these songs even before they were played the first time. Was this music created in their homes and somehow provided to the school? How could they know it already?

Evan would get other glimpses of the different world where his classmates lived. He didn't know the local places that they referred to: This or that church, the ice cream stand, the playgrounds, the lake, secret swimming holes, the movie theater. The one place he did know was Sheetz, the small chain of convenience stores growing quickly on the basis of consistency and appeal. He didn't know the television programs that other students talked about, because his father only ever watched sports or fishing shows. He had never been in the department stores where their new clothes came from, because his clothes, nice enough but second-hand, would be dropped off every few months by his sister Bree's grandparents (they were his mother's parents, but he could never grasp that they were his grandparents as well). They had asked Jake to take Evan shopping, but he always refused. "Not and have you run me down to him," Jake said, "and then bring him back with his head full of lies."

Bree's (his) grandparents would have to guess at his sizes. Bree herself would always be the one to carry the bags in to him. She would give him a quick hug and caress his cheek or tousle his hair. He would feel her touch the rest of the day and relive it as he lay in bed.

There would be times when the new batches of clothes all ran too big or too small, because Bree and her (his) grandparents had misjudged how much he had or had not grown.

Evan's clothes were embarrassingly loose that first day of square dancing, his shirt and pants flapping, but he had wanted to wear some of his newer, cleaner items. He tried to hang back and stay out of the dancing altogether, but there was no avoiding it. Mrs. Laurent's cheerful insistence was too cheerful and too insistent. "These girls need partners, and I need you boys to volunteer." The boys had trouble hiding their amusement with her cajoling.

Evan never would forget that first dance, his first pairing with Anabelle, nor what she had been wearing. Her white blouse was flouncy. It had a wide squared neck and a gathering of fabric across the front. Its sleeves flared into openings like bells that partly covered her hands. She wore it over rolled-up blue jeans. Daydreaming or drifting to sleep, Evan could see Anabelle clearly in the white blouse. He delighted in its shape and how it fell on her. He knew that the blouse was decorated with lines of colorful flowers, and he tried to recall their exact placement. He imagined the flowers onto the blouse in various configurations, hoping to have one of the arrangements click into place as being accurate. But sleep or work or another distraction always dragged him away before he reached certainty. Evan kept watching for Anabelle to wear the same blouse to school again, but she never did. Maybe something happened to it. Had it been ruined by a stain or snagged on a nail? Had Anabelle loaned it out, never to see its return? Had staining or snagging happened at the borrower's house? Evan spent many nights irritated at this imagined blouse-borrower-and-ruiner.

Even in a tiny school, Evan hardly had cause to speak to Anabelle. At that point in their lives, boys and girls scorned each other. They never talked, except as required in class, or perhaps by speaking loudly to their own kind, boys to boys and girls to girls, with jabs and insults meant to be overheard.

Nothing changed when they moved on to the junior high school for seventh grade. They both rode the same bus, Evan from farther out so that he was able to watch her through the window as the bus approached her home. Blessedly, her accustomed seat was several rows ahead, letting him appear to be simply gazing forward while stealing glances at her coming down the aisle. He spent the rest of each ride adoring the back of her head.

One thing did change. Evan heard her introduce herself to their homeroom teacher as Ana Day. This saddened him. It felt like a loss, so often had he traced her full name in his mind: Anabelle Faye Day, Anabelle Faye, Anabelle.

But in time this gave way to a sense of being her protector. He was among a select few who knew her secret—her actual full name. It was as if she had entrusted him with a sacred responsibility. When they studied medieval history in eighth grade, he learned about knights and ladies. Without ever fully articulating it, that was how he came to see himself: The Knight of Lady Day.

One day, he would indeed step forward to serve her. And she him.

Evan's father, of course, had no idea of Evan's interest in Ana. If Jake had known, he would have found a way to use the information for cruelty. There was no secret that Evan held more closely than his regard for Ana.

So it will seem odd to hear that Jake threw Evan and Ana together. Indirectly, to be sure, but if not for Jake, Evan would never have had the pleasure of piloting a car through the night with his beloved as passenger.

The excursion happened well before Evan had a driver's license. This will take some explaining.

Evan started driving without a license because of the deliveries. Customers of Jake's often needed their repaired vehicles driven back to them. Evan performed this service before he legally could. This was made possible by early height and premature practice behind the wheel. Evan sprouted up overnight when he turned twelve. By thirteen, he was as tall as his father.

Jake, of course, tormented him about this. Mocked his changing voice. Pulled (hard and painfully) on his first whiskers. Then he became enraged at Evan's reflexively raising a hand against this. His hand shot past Evan's arm and grabbed his hair as he said, "Don't like having your hair pulled, Eevie?" (that being his needling nickname for Evan) "Where else you got some new sprouts?" His other hand shot down toward Evan's belt and under it, below it, and found more new hair to yank. He left Evan writhing on the ground.

That very evening, when Evan was holed up with homework, Jake found him and flung a set of keys at him.

"That Chevy, the tan one," he said, "take it up to McSweeney."

Jake was drunk. He slurred these words and left without waiting for a reply.

Evan's mind buzzed. He'd long had to think through not only what Jake said but all the permutations of what his father would think that he'd said, what he'd meant to say, and things that Jake would never come close to saying. Evan had to zoom in and out of any situation and take everything into account—beyond everything. He had to look over an impossibly shifting game board and place bets that would mean the difference between his dodging or receiving a beating, between his being able to go to school or having to work on cars through the night, potentially between his living and dying.

He made a lightning interpretation and decision. Jake was telling him to drive the car to its owner's home, and Evan would do it. He would drive the car despite being three years away

from legally being able to drive, despite having never taken a car onto a town road, despite the fact that it was past ten at night. Even a hesitation risked a beating. He had to place his bet. Evan took the key and found the tan Chevrolet.

Evan knew how to drive. He had started before he was ten. Jake repaired the odd go-cart now and then, and Evan had driven those. It wasn't for fun—Jake needed to test them, and he was too big to get in. Evan had driven whatever Jake had told him to, anything he was tall enough to drive: tractors, lawnmowers, snowmobiles, pickup trucks. At age eleven, when Jake had to tune up a dozen wrecks well enough to last a round or two in a demolition derby, Evan had driven each of them across a dirt track and into line. He had misjudged and hit one of the cars with the other. He had braced himself for a beating, but miraculously this particular incident had struck Jake as funny. He just laughed and waved at Evan to keep working. Whiplashing from tension to relief made Evan wobble as he ran to the next wreck he was to move.

So when he took out the Chevy that night, he knew what he was doing.

Well, Evan knew most of what he was doing. The thing that he hadn't ever done was drive at night. But he knew the working of headlights from having repaired them. He knew high and low beams and when to use them. That helped, but it wasn't the knowing of actually having driven at night.

He didn't hesitate, though, to start on his way. This was partly because he had no choice. He had to play out his bet. It was partly because the night was bright and clear, and that would make it somewhat easier to drive. But it was also because of what lay between him and the home of Ed McSweeney, where he would leave the car. He would drive past a particular house (if all went well) and then see it again walking back.

The route to deliver the car passed by the home of Ana Day.

CHAPTER 6

Evan was determined not to make a fool of himself driving past Ana's house. Keep control.

Don't hit the ditch in sight of her porch. Lord no.

But also, of course, as he approached, he had to keep glancing away from the road in hopes of catching a glimpse of her.

... and back to the road to make sure he was staying in his lane.

... and back toward Ana's house as he rounded the curve just before her driveway.

... and back to the road, because it was a blind turn where opposing traffic couldn't see him until it came through. Fortunately, no oncoming headlights were tingeing the leaves of the broad elm at the curve, so the road beyond was empty.

... and back toward Ana's house, his eyes probing every corner of the property, no matter how remote the chance of her being in a particular spot past ten at night. On the roof? No, she wasn't there. Sitting at the picnic table in the yard? Nope. Getting the mail from the mailbox? No, of course not. She would be inside, either already asleep or ...

... back to the road. Whoa, you swung wide there, dummy, slow down.

... back to the house. Which window was her room anyway?

Evan was crawling now, rolling no faster than a float in a crowded parade.

... when suddenly to his shock one of the car's back door handles was engaged, and a slim figure slid in and shut the door with the utmost care to keep quiet.

Evan snapped about to look, forgetting his pull on the steering wheel. The car yawed right, and Evan spun back around, jerking the wheel to the left. The zagging of the car made his rider tumble across the back seat into the gap behind him, bulging the seat into his back.

The yelp and whispered curse behind Evan sent a thrill through him that none other in his life had approached.

His passenger was Ana Day.

Evan bore on toward the McSweeney home, heart pounding, eyes to the rear view mirror, eyes to the road ... mirror, road ... mirror filled with Ana's wide eyes. There was a moment of mutual consternation, then another. Then Ana gripped the top of the seat back and hissed, "Evan, what are you doing? How in the world did you—" (a gasp) "Evan Easter, you stole this car."

"No, I—"

"Evan!" Ana gasped. She clapped a hand onto his shoulder and pointed at the tree he was suddenly piloting toward.

Evan steered back to the middle of the road and hit the brake. The car jolted to a stop. Ana pressed against the back of the seat to keep from falling behind it again.

The forward mash of momentum was not only in Evan's body but in his mind. Everything occupied the same space at once:

Ana was here.

She'd said his name.

Shrieked it.

She had pushed and pulled the seat.

Grabbed.

His.

Shoulder.

Things couldn't get any better than this. Until they did.

Ana scrambled over the seat to sit beside him.

"What are you doing?" Ana said. "This is Jane McSweeney's car!"

Jane was three grades ahead of them. She would have been one of Ana's nearest neighbors all of her life. That helped Evan realize what was going on. Jane was old enough to have a license. Ana must have thought she was jumping into the tan Chevrolet to join Jane. As some kind of partner in crime?

"What are you doing in Jane McSweeney's car?" Evan whispered back, leaning on the word "you". "She your getaway driver?"

Ana sat back stiffly and said, "None of your business."

"Yes, then," Evan said.

"Well, it's not like we were going to go out and steal cars," Ana said, leaning on the word "we".

"You know I didn't steal it," Evan said.

"Do I?"

She doesn't think about you at all, dummy, Evan told himself.

"My dad fixed it up," he said. "He told me to take it back."

"To their house?"

He grunted yes.

"Huh," she said, taking this in. "So how will you get home?"

Here, heavenly joy, she touched his sleeve and corrected herself. “How will we get home?”

“Walk,” Evan said.

“What is it, four miles?” Ana said.

“Only about two back to your house,” Evan said.

“At night, though.”

“I’ll be with you,” Evan said, tasting the most delectable words ever to pass his lips.

“You sure will,” Ana said, with sternness that made him melt. She sat back again, facing front, wordlessly saying: Let’s get going.

Let’s.

Let us.

Us.

Heart pounding, Evan took care to look behind them for headlights. Then he pulled out and drove on.

Through

moonlight

with

Ana.

Evan hadn’t bargained on having to talk to Mr. or Mrs. McSweeney, nor their daughter Jane, when he delivered their car. If he had, he would have realized that this could not possibly happen. There could be no exchange with him, an underage night driver. But he hadn’t thought about it one way or the other. At best, he had a vague sense that he would conduct a stealth operation. Get in, get out, go home. Now he wasn’t even thinking about that. The only thoughts in his

mind were: Keep the car on the road, and I'm going to get to walk Ana back home. It was an evening of wonders. An image came to him—a painting that he must have seen at school, of an inky blue sky pinwheeling with brightness above a sleeping village. That was the magic that they moved beneath.

But wait ... what was this Ana was urging? She was shaking his arm, drawing him from his reverie.

Evan was mortified to discover that he was already approaching the McSweeneys' home. No how, no way could he be caught driving this car. He was only thirteen years old. His father could not have entrusted him to drive a customer's car at night. Yet Ana had hissed this at him:

“Stop, Evan, stop! Jane's dad is on the porch!”

Evan pressed the brake and let the car glide to the side of the road, where it was partially shielded from the McSweeneys' porch by the overhang of a tree. He turned off the engine and reached for the switch that would douse the headlights, but then he thought better of it. It was too late. Mr. McSweeney had to have seen the car approaching. Even now, peering through the branches, Evan saw that Mr. McSweeney had come to the edge of the porch and was craning a look in their direction.

Evan saw one way out. He spun and leaned toward Ana to explain, but he found his stomach dropping at the sight of her, quickened by this danger, a doe with eyes wide and shining. Her head curved to meet his as if to receive a kiss or a sweet nothing. But in his whisper was a deadly everything: a hasty plan to protect his father's reputation and business, and thus his own life.

Ana's eyes grew yet wider. She nodded and (oh glory) gave his hand a squeeze.

Not trusting himself to seek her eyes one last time, Evan drew a deep breath and bounded from the car.

Evan hurried toward the porch and Mr. McSweeney, feeling the headlights both obscuring the vehicle and making him a silhouette that he needed to identify.

“Mr. McSweeney?” he called. “We ... uh ... This is your car. We’re bringing it back.”

“Oh,” McSweeney said, with a note of relief, “now I see.” He took the keys that Evan offered.

“Sorry we’re doing this so late,” Evan said. “My dad just felt like returning it right now.”

“Let me get you a check.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Evan said. “We didn’t even know if you’d be up. We were just going to drop it off and put the keys in your mailbox. He’ll call you in the morning.” Out here in the country, Evan had put keys in many a mailbox.

“Oh nonsense, it won’t take a minute,” McSweeney said.

“We didn’t even bring out the bill,” Evan said.

“Well, Jake will know how much it is.” McSweeney nodded toward the car. “I’ll be right back.” He turned toward his front door.

Evan spoke up quickly. “Well, the thing is,” he said, bringing McSweeney to a stop, “Dad just wanted to get home. He started feeling sick on the way over. Fever, I think. Kinda queasy.”

This was tricky territory. It was safe to assume that McSweeney knew that Jake was a drinker. He would have seen the cases of empties at the garage.

“Oh Lord,” McSweeney said, “don't tell me he drove my car over here drunk.”

“No no no no,” Evan rattled. “No, just, uh ... queasy. Like a stomach bug.”

“That so?” McSweeney said.

“Yup,” Evan said, praying that he was selling this.

“And now you two want a ride back?” McSweeney said.

“Oh no no no,” Evan rattled again. “Dad just wanted to ... We’ll just have a nice walk back. He thought the air would do him good.”

“Even though he’s sick?” McSweeney said.

“Well, because he’s sick, really,” Evan said.

McSweeney frowned and dropped his voice and, “Look now ... Did he throw up in the car?”

“Oh, no, not at—”

“Because I don’t want to just discover that after you leave.”

“No, I promise you, he di—”

“I better just take a look.” McSweeney moved now to step off the porch.

“Okay, wait,” Evan said. “He did barf.”

“Ohnooo,” McSweeney moaned.

“But not in the car,” Evan said. “I swear. It was beside the car. That’s why he stopped back there, to get out quick.”

McSweeney’s face was aghast. Evan dropped his voice. “We’ll just go now.”

McSweeney had ceased motion. Staying put on the porch would save him from confirming that Jake Easter had driven his car drunk. Or at least let him put off discovering a beer-fumed puddle of vomit next to the vehicle. He grunted something of an agreement.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose.”

“Yup,” Evan said.

“Good night then,” McSweeney said.

“Night,” Evan said, turning. “Thanks.”

As he walked back toward the car, an image came to him of McSweeney checking for the puddle of vomit, playing a flashlight around the car’s wheels. Not finding it, circling the car. Scratching his head, confused ...

“Oh!” McSweeney called after Evan.

He stopped and turned to look back.

“Tell Jake that I hope ...” Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and boomed out, “Hope you feel better, Jake!”

The horn sounded back. It was Jake’s reply.

Evan could have cried. God bless that Ana.

He returned to the car and motioned for Ana to step out and start down the road. He made keep-it-slow motions with his hand, and Ana nodded. She was portraying an ill Jake, so she had to move gingerly. Evan crouched to help bolster the illusion that, if their silhouettes were visible, Jake’s height approximated his own.

He let Jake/Ana get something of a lead before he switched off the headlights and shut the car door. Then he jogged after his father/friend, slowing as he caught up to him/her.

After they rounded the bend, Ana halted and turned to him, her mouth wide with the happy scream that she pretended to make, putting on that she was biting her fist to hold back the sound. Her other hand found his for yet another hard squeeze.

They swallowed their giddiness and made quick distance back toward Ana’s home.

CHAPTER 7

After they'd gone far enough that it was safe to speak, Ana's first question to Evan was: "What did you say? Tell me word for word!" Evan recreated the exchange with Mr. McSweeney as best he could.

"He really thought your dad was in the car?" Ana said.

"He had to have. Especially after the horn sounded. You were ... that was ... beautiful."

She mimed hitting the horn and made its sound. "Hooonk!"

They laughed.

"Just beautiful," Evan repeated, directing his eyes not only at the road.

"How did you ever think of all that?" she said, leaning on the first word.

"Just had to," Evan said, "If I'd got caught, Dad woulda wh—" He let this trail off in a shrug, but Ana finished for him: "Whipped you. He would have whipped you."

"Whipped me good," Evan said, putting a chuckle in it.

"He would have, wouldn't he," Ana said. She had stopped walking.

Evan stopped as well, avoiding her eyes.

"Right, Evan?"

Now he did keep his gaze on the ground.

"Evan," Ana said. "Look at me." But he wouldn't.

She reached for his elbow. He didn't resist her pull, but he didn't give way either, and Ana couldn't begin to make him turn. She went around in front of him, ducking into his down-cast sight.

"It's not right, you know," she said. "What he does."

He remained still. She finally put a hand on either side of his head, unabashedly gripped his ears and aligned his eyes with hers.

"I know," she said. "People know what happens to you."

Ana couldn't possibly know the full extent of what Jake did. No one did. Not even Jake. He didn't plan his next move against Evan. He just found it. He had a bottomless energy and taste for it. A gift, even.

"Evan," Ana said. "Can't it stop? Isn't there any way?"

He raised his face to the sky as he sometimes did, eliminating the world by not seeing any of it. It pained him to erase Ana in this way, but it was his only way to escape her questions.

Ana moved in then, throwing her arms around Evan and pulling in tight.

Evan kept his chin on the stars and let his arms hang, purposely not circling them around Ana for fear of making this hug something she had not intended. He felt the air cool the wet in his eyes. He wished to be in this moment forever, entwined with Ana on this very spot.

Ana finally did step back but left her hands on his arms.

"You okay?" she said.

All he could do was nod.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she said.

Evan felt filled with cement, utterly unable to move. His lips parted, but his tongue and throat stiffened. In his mind, Ana's question was like oil in water, separating into words that

could not possibly adhere into an understandable thought. He found himself peering out from his own face like a beseeching dog.

Ana released one of his hands and touched his cheek. "It's okay," she said, "It's okay. Shhhh. Maybe another time."

They stood still until finding a way to break the moment. They resumed walking with slow steps and stayed silent until at last there were words.

"You can tell me this, I think," Ana said, "How is it that you can drive a car?"

"Oh, I've been driving forever," Evan said. "Dad fixes all kinds of vehicles, and he always had me move them when he needed it, just to save time. Even when I couldn't see over the dashboards."

"So not just cars?" Ana said.

"Well mostly cars and trucks, but we get in anything: go-karts, snowmobiles, tractors."

"Big tractors?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"And the little ones?"

"Lawn tractors."

"Yeah, lawn tractors."

"Dad never told me how to operate anything," Evan said. "I just had to figure it out. Didn't always go well. I rolled a golf cart once."

"You did not!"

"I sure did," Evan said. "Well, sorta."

"Sort of a golf cart, or you sorta rolled it?"

"Both."

“Huh?” Ana said. Evan knew that in full light he would have been able to see her nose wrinkle just then.

“They call them utility vehicles,” Evan said. “Out at the Country Club, the grounds people have them. Sort of a cross between a golf cart and a truck, like a little dump truck cart thing.”

“Sounds cute!” Ana said.

“They use them for all kinds of stuff,” Evan said, “like when they have to haul sand out to a sand trap. They can’t rut up all the grass with a heavy full-size truck so they use these little ones. They’re lighter. But they’re strong and they have fat wheels and a bed in the back that can tilt just like a dump truck. On some of them, the bed can even raise up so you can drive under a tree and go up to prune it.” He made the sound of a hydraulic lift and mimed bringing pruning shears together to chop a branch. “Bzzzhhh ... Tchkk!”

“Aww! Baby dump trucks!” Ana said.

“Sure, baby dump trucks,” Evan grinned. “Dad would have to go out there to the course to work on them, because they can’t go out on the road and be driven to our shop.”

Ana laughed. “Imagine a parade of baby dump trucks going down the road.” She did her own mime, waving like a beauty queen to each side of the road. “Hel-lo! Hel-lo!” She blew kisses and did a herding motion to urge on her invisible ride. “Let’s go, Baby Dump Truck!”

“So anyway, I rolled one,” Evan said.

“Sorta rolled,” Ana corrected him.

“Sorta rolled one,” Evan said. “When I was out there at the Country Club with Dad this one time. The head maintenance guy was there, Monty Connors, Mon-Con, they call him, nice guy, and some of the crew were waiting to use the thing. And Dad got it fixed up, and Monty

asks if I want to take it for a spin. I didn't know if Dad would let me, so I kind of shrugged, but he said it was okay, so I did."

"And you rolled it?" said Ana.

"Well, I hopped in, and it took right off." Evan smacked one palm off the other, zooming it straight out. "The pedal was kind of touchy—sensitive, I mean, and the thing had more power than I thought. And didn't I end up aiming right at this little hill, and I was afraid of flipping over backward, so I turned at the last minute so that instead of going straight up I was driving along the face of it, you know?"

"Oh gawd," Ana said.

Evan kept this a funny story even as he felt the dread that had seized him in the moment. What an utter disaster for Jake—and and for him at the hands of Jake—if he damaged the cart. Fear had paralyzed him.

"It was like being high up on a really steep banked turn, you know? And not being able to get out of it." He mimed steering at the impossible angle. "Everything in the cart, tools and just, everything, is falling toward me because this baby is about to—"

"This baby dump truck," Ana corrected him.

"This baby dump truck is about to roll," he said.

"But thank God, the crew guys shot out and ran alongside it, and they grabbed the top part of the frame to keep the cart on the ground. That gave me time to stop freaking out and steer off the slope and come to a stop."

Ana pushed out a relieved breath as if she had just witnessed the whole thing.

Evan didn't tell her about looking back across the green and seeing his father's face red and hard and knowing what was in store for him later. It hit him that virtually anything he told Ana would lead to details that he would leave out.

Fortunately, Ana started talking about her sister, Olive (the other old-fashioned name that her parents had bestowed) and how they fought like wildcats over everything. "From dolls to dollars to doughnuts," Ana said.

"But I'll tell you this," she added, with a stern gesture. "Nobody else had better lay a finger on Olive."

Evan nodded. He had seen her in action on the playground fighting for Olive. Crossing Ana or her sister did not go well.

"She saved my life once," Ana said.

"Oh?" Evan said.

"You know The Bend?" she asked.

He knew only that it was a swimming hole. "Know of it," he said. "Not where it is or anything."

"You don't?" Ana was surprised. "I love it there. Janey Mac and I go all the time."

"At night." Evan said this with a tone of something clicking into place. Janey Mac was what she called Jane McSweeney, tonight's would-be getaway driver.

Ana laughed. "Right you are!" She pulled up on her shirt and down on the hem of her jean shorts and said, "Look!"

Evan found himself looking at Ana's exposed hip. It took a moment to register that he wasn't seeing skin but the fabric of a one-piece bathing suit. In the moonlight, the cloth was a gray that he somehow knew would be red in sunshine.

Evan was stunned. Ana laughed, let her clothes go back into place and gave him a good-natured shove. Now his own face was a red disguised by the dark.

“You can’t tell!” Ana said. “My parents would kill me!”

“Tell what?” he said, playing along.

She laughed.

He found himself noting that, unlike him, she never actually did have to think about being killed by a parent.

“Huh,” Ana said, putting a hitch in her step. “I didn’t even stop to think until now that Janey and I must have got our signals crossed about running out tonight. Because obviously she didn’t show. She must not have realized that her dad’s car would be at your shop, and she didn’t call to tell me. That would be like her. Wouldn’t be the first time.” She shook her head.

“Brunettes, you know?” she said with a note of tease.

“I know,” Evan said. His hair was as dark as chocolate syrup. Hers was vanilla.

“Anyway,” she said, “I nearly drowned once at The Bend. The bottom can change out there after storms, or I think just from time passing, and once I hit a drop-off that just hadn’t been there before. And all of a sudden I had two feet of water over my head, and my feet are on the bottom in this cold, thick mud with this suck to it, and it was dark and freezing down there, a real freak-out situation. I’m telling you, I wouldn’t have made it without Olive. It was just the two of us. She saw me disappear and knew something was wrong, so she dove under and grabbed my hand, and I kicked up. She guided me out of it, and I popped back to the top.”

She shook her head remembering it. “Air is your friend, Evan.” She punctuated this with a deep breath. “No doubt in my mind that I would have drowned.”

“But you still swim out there?” Evan said.

“Well, it made me mad, you know? No way was I going to let that water or that muddy bottom beat me. Not the Bend, not anything.” She shook her fist as if putting any and all enemies on notice. “I’ll show you!”

She looked at him. “I just don’t do it, Evan.”

“Do what?” he said.

“Fear,” she said, then play-punched his arm on each word: “I. Do. Not. Do. Fear.”

Ana dropped her fist. “I think it was the opposite for Olive. Not like she stopped swimming or anything. But when we got to shore, I was all like, ‘I’m getting right back in and touch the bottom!’, which I did. But her eyes were big, and I knew that look. It was like: ‘I’m not going there again. That was enough for me.’ I think it threw a switch the other way in her. She’s quiet, she likes things (Ana had to search for the words) ... Regular. Predictable.”

“Not me!” she said. “Bring it on, baby!”

“BUT,” she stressed. “I’m not stupid. I won’t go to The Bend alone. Only on the buddy system,” Ana said. “I never go without Janey Mac.”

The thought stung Evan: Ana would never go to The Bend only with him. Never just the two of them.

you idiot. you don't even know where the place is, you don't swim, you don't do anything with anyone, you don't mean anything to her.

She hugged me, he answered himself.

will you stop? that was just ... what it was. a hug. pity.

Still.

just. stop.

But ...

you are not swimming with her. what are you thinking? that's just insane. you are not doing anything with her. she is not in your life. no one can be in your life.

He had no answer to himself for that.

Evan walked on after he left Ana at her home. The moon and stars were now much further away. Moments before, all of the sky had seemed a bright bubble around them. As they drew in view of her house, Ana swiveled to stand in front of him.

“Here we are,” she said. “Thanks for walking me back—and driving me out.” She laughed. “It was fun.”

He nodded. Fun was an impossibly small word for what it had been.

“I’ll see you at school,” she said. “Or, on the bus, actually.” She touched his arm yet again, a rapture each time. “You take care.”

Then she moved in for another hug. He kept his arms out away from her again, making her say dryly, “You give the best hugs, Evan. With a little practice, you’d be world class.”

She stepped back and looked at him. “We’ll work on it.” Then she turned and made a stealthy run back toward her home.

He ached as he turned and put her at his back. He pressed his lips together and squinted against the pain. It was worse than anything Jake had ever done to him. He missed her before he took a step.

He retraced every moment of the evening in his mind, lingering at first one hug and then the other. He hadn’t let his hands move in around her during those moments, not wanting to make her uncomfortable. But now, when he was sure that he was out of sight down the road, cloaked in his usual invisibility as well as the dim of the night, he stopped walking and leaned