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THE LAST THREE HOURS

Exactly twenty-two students showed up to Kruger Hall to hear University President Hayes' announcement. It was not hard to find a seat in the snow-pocalypse. Will sat down beside his only remaining friend, Tanner Black. The heaters buzzed in the nearly-empty auditorium, but Will kept his coat on, as well as his scarf and hat. It would likely be a short affair in Kruger Hall.

The president did not keep the bundled audience waiting. Flanked by two or three of the remaining faculty and administrators, she strode to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today," she said. "It is with a heavy heart and my deepest regrets that I must inform you that the university will be closing its doors, effective immediately, due to unsustainably low student enrollment and faculty presence. With another winter coming on, and this one predicted to be worse than the previous three, the university can no longer afford the operational costs of remaining open. Your tuition and expenses for this semester will be reimbursed in full. As you all know, we are living in difficult and unprecedented times. Many in our community have chosen not to continue on this journey we know as life, and we respect their choices. Each of you will have to consider your own future and make very personal decisions about your individual destinies. I will keep this announcement brief, as we will be shutting down this building and all campus facilities over the next few hours. But I would like to close by saying that it has been an honor for me to serve the academic community as president of this university. I sincerely thank each of you for your commitment to your education, and I wish you the best of luck in your futures. Thank you."

"I was looking forward to my Medieval Philosophy seminar," Tanner Black muttered as he laced up his winter boots. He turned to Will. "What are you going to do now, Will?"

Will shrugged. "Go home," he said.

The majestic stone buildings of the university looked like gravestones buried beneath snowdrifts as Will lumbered away from campus in the dark blue morning. His possessions were stuffed into an enormous backpack strapped to his shoulders. The lights of the academic buildings were already extinguished. One or two solo bulbs burned in the dormitories. There was nobody walking the quad.

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A lone street lamp cast a hazy yellow glow over the bus station. Will was the only person waiting for the bus. It was a ten-hour ride from Ohio back to his hometown of Drury, New York, population formerly 2,500, now around 600. Will would arrive late at night, and the ride would offer him plenty of time to think. His plan was to go to Florida, to the bunkers the government was building. He knew Cora was still alive, and he hoped he could convince her to come with him. Cora and his brother, Luke. His remaining family and friends, well, who knew what they would decide to do, facing another winter? His parents had been talking openly about the Pill. But as long as he could get Cora and Luke to come with him, there was still hope. Together they could forge some kind of future underground, as thousands of others were planning to do, waiting out the long winter that would hopefully one day break into spring.

The bus crawled to a stop in front of Will, the engine chugging like a giant beast catching its breath. The bus driver stepped out and opened the storage compartment. Will tossed his pack inside.

“You’re a lucky young man,” the driver told him. “We’re disbanding in three days. Last run to upstate New York, and you’re on it.”

Will said nothing. He handed the driver his ticket. The man didn’t even glance at it.

The bus was empty. Will chose a seat by the window and settled in for the long ride. The air inside the bus was not exactly warm, but not freezing. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed home. His mother, Susan, answered, and Will heard the television in the background. He wondered what might be on, since most of the channels were gone.

“I’m coming home, Mom,” Will said. “They closed the university.”

“Well, I suppose that was inevitable,” Susan replied. “I’m glad you’re coming home, sweetheart. This winter is supposed to be the worst yet. Your father and I have been talking with our friends, and we’ve decided we’re not going to wait around till the bitter end. We’re going to throw a big party, like in the old days, and we’re all going out together- everyone who’s left.”

“That’s great, Mom,” Will muttered, suddenly feeling very tired and alone. He did not tell her he had no intention of “going out.”

It had begun as a particularly harsh winter, with blinding snowstorms, sub-zero temperatures, gale-force winds. For six months most of the northern hemisphere was buried beneath six to ten feet of snow. Cities like

Los Angeles and Miami got snow. Havoc reigned, municipal budgets were exhausted, crime and suicide rates soared.

There was no spring thaw. There were hurricanes of freezing rain and sleet, hale the size of footballs, July snowstorms. In September the temperature took another precipitous plunge. Panic ensued. Infrastructure broke down. It was the end of days, intoned various religious groups. The government declared martial law where necessary. The media over-reported the mayhem, fueling more panic. The snow-pocalypse became political. One party insisted that a new ice age was merely a theory, and under no circumstances should people panic and stop buying things, especially petroleum-based fossil fuels. The rival party accused the first party of creating an elite oil-tocracy run by big energy barons, and encouraged people to use alternative, largely-untested fuels to heat their homes, such as kale-, hemp- and soy-based fuels, which did not work, and resulted in thousands of proud progressives freezing to death. Meanwhile scientists around the world shouted a unanimously ignored battle cry that an ice age was not a political theory, and that the climate change might last thousands of years.

The cold killed everything. Fauna and flora dropped off the planet like dominos. Cities burned, infrastructure collapsed, and bands of brigands terrorized the countryside. Until the government developed the Pill, a universal solution to the ice age. The mayhem subsided, a general wave of acceptance swept over the damned denizens of the United States and other countries, and things returned to a relative, though increasingly fatalistic, level of normalcy.

The Pill was about the size of an almond, and tasted sort of like caramel. The immediate sub-cutaneous layer was a modified slow-acting sodium thiopental solution designed to induce sleep. Beneath the sodium thiopental was pancuronium bromide, a muscle relaxer which stopped breathing. Finally the core of the Pill was a hearty, concentrated dose of heart-stopping potassium chloride. It was the same combination of drugs used by State prison facilities in the administration of the death penalty, before the death penalty became a redundancy. The Pill was specially designed by scientists to be a euphoric way to go- slow, increasingly warm tingly feeling, painless slip into coma, no return to consciousness. Once swallowed the Pill took about three hours to work.

Will stared out the window of the bus and contemplated the fourth year of continuous winter. Mostly he thought of everyone who was already dead. His cousin Grace, and Uncle Mark and Aunt Tilda had taken the

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Pill. Most of his hometown had swallowed theirs during the previous winter, when the bitter cold and long, dark days had finally become unbearable. Almost everyone he'd gone to school with, both in Drury and at college, was gone.

The bus passed through one wintry ghost town after another: empty, boarded buildings submerged in snowdrifts; houses with open doors like black, frozen mouths; leafless, skeletal trees. Occasionally Will saw a light on- a church or a bar.

He turned away from the white-washed pastures and collapsing farm houses and pulled out his cell phone again. He dialed Cora.

"Will?" Her voice was lilac sweet, like a spring day.

"Hey hey," he said. He told her he was coming home. He felt like a soldier returning from war, escaping something he would never have to confront again.

"Our parents are throwing a Pill Party," Cora said, and to Will's dismay she sounded relieved. "One more big brouhaha, just like when we were kids."

"I heard," Will said. He felt his chest tighten. "We should go, I guess. See everyone off... But I'm not taking the Pill."

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"I'm going to Florida," Will said. "To the bunkers. I want you to come with me, Cora."

Again Will heard nothing but her heavy breathing. "You really think there are bunkers in Florida?" she asked.

"I've seen them on the internet," Will said. "Some people aren't giving up."

"I've seen riots. They're not letting anyone in."

"It's a chance." The bus passed an abandoned pharmacy, on the facade of which someone had spray-painted "Let this not be the last thing you see." "I want you to come with me," Will repeated. "You and Luke."

"We'll talk about it when you get here. Joe and I have an idea of our own." Her voice brightened again. "Can't wait to see you, buddy."

Will's heart quickened, and he thought of the old Cora, Cora in summer, her creamy legs in shorts as the three of them ran to the tree house, Cora holding each of the boys by the hand. She would not give up Joe, he knew. Not unless he could convince her.

When the bus pulled into Drury Will was asleep. The driver roused him.

“Good luck to you and yours,” he said as Will heaved his backpack out of the storage compartment. Will nodded as the man stepped back onto the bus, another person he would never see again.

Drury was a one-stoplight town, its commercial district no more than three or four snowy streets. The only establishment with a lamp still burning was Elmo’s Tavern. Will saw that Elmo had even kept his Christmas lights strung up in the window, a sight he found welcoming against the midnight darkness. Two or three cars were parked outside the bar on the hastily-plowed street, including the old familiar station wagon, and he knew he would find his father inside. Shouldering his backpack, he pulled his scarf over his face and trudged across the street.

Inside the Tavern Will saw three familiar figures slouched at the bar. His eye was drawn magnetically to the broad, flannel-shirted shoulders of his father, George. Beside George sat Cora’s father, Mike Payne, the two men as inseparable in the endless winter as they had been through countless changing seasons before. Both men smiled as Will closed the door and dropped his pack on the floor.

“There’s my boy!” said George, beckoning his son over to the bar. Mike Payne saluted him with a shot of whiskey as Will took the empty seat next to his father. Elmo, the bartender, sat slumped against the bar, grinning drunkenly. On the television above him the sports channel was replaying a pervious World Series. Major League Baseball was no more.

George picked up a two-way radio off the bar and pressed the button. “Elmo,” he said in a low voice. “Pour my son a shot, will ya?”

Elmo picked up an identical radio and breathed hot, boozy air into it. “I don’t know, George, is the boy twenty-one?”

All three men started laughing, and Will grinned as well. They were playing their favorite game. Many Christmases ago Cora’s mother Angelie had gotten Mike and George the walkie-talkies as a gift, joking that now they would be truly inseparable. Thinking it was funny, George and Mike had incorporated the radios into their nightly drinking routine at Elmo’s, giving one to the bartender and calling in orders from five feet away.

“You twenty-one, boy?” Will’s father asked him, red-faced from drink.

“Twenty, Dad.”

“Who’s counting,” said Elmo. He poured everyone a shot. Will accepted a toast in his honor and drank with the men he had known his entire life.

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“Might as well save you the suspense,” George said, patting his son on the shoulder. “We’re having a little party in a few days.”

“Mom told me,” Will said.

“Yeah? So you know then.” George sipped his whiskey slowly, savoring the throaty burn. “I’m glad you’re here with us, Will. I admired you for keeping on with college, but frankly you ain’t gonna need it.”

Will nodded and stared into his drink. The whiskey warmed his belly. Elmo poured him another. “You going out too, Elmo?” Will asked.

“Not until I drink through my stores,” Elmo said proudly, nodding at the bottles behind his bar. “I’ll wash my Pill down with the last shot, but until then, we’re open for business.”

“At this point I’d rather get it over with,” said Mike Payne. “I won’t go out like an animal, freezing or starving to death. I’ll kick the bucket with a little dignity.”

Will’s father clinked glasses with his friend. Will kept his own agenda to himself. It would do no good to spoil it for his parents. If they were intent on taking the Pill, then it was better to let them believe he was going out with them.

Though only slightly less drunk than his father, Will drove them both home from Elmo’s Tavern, swerving through the snowy ruts in the dark country roads. They passed abandoned farmland and the rusted shells of tractors. Finally a light appeared on the black hillside, and Will deftly steered the car up his winding driveway.

At home his mother met him with a tight hug. He welcomed her embrace, her cinnamon scent that told him she’d been baking. They gathered around the woodstove in the living room. Will’s younger brother Luke lay slumped on the couch watching television with a blanket over his legs and the family golden retriever, Bart, lying across his lap. The room was warm, almost hot, a fresh pile of wood stacked beside the stove, the curtains drawn to shut out the winterland outside.

“Well, we’re all here,” said Susan. “Everyone home. The way it should be. We can relax and enjoy these last few days.”

Will looked to his brother, who stared at the television with a vacant grin. Bart’s wagging tail thumped against the couch cushions. Will felt his chest tighten. He sat up in his chair and addressed his mother.

“Mom, I don’t want to do it,” he said. “I don’t want it to end now.”

His mother smiled patiently as if she had been expecting him to say this. "I know you're scared, honey," she said. "But we'll all be together. The four of us, and all our friends. We'll all be going together."

"Going where?" Will asked. "Why can't we go to Florida, to the bunkers? Why are we just giving up?"

"The bunkers are for the rich, son," his father said. "For scientists and the army and corporate big shots. They're shooting regular folks who are trying to get in."

"How do you know that?" Will asked.

His father shrugged. "We can't afford another winter anyway. Your mother and I are out of work. We've chopped down nearly all the trees on the property just to keep the woodstove going. And I don't want to freeze to death."

"Every day someone else from Drury is gone," Susan said. "Your grandparents took the Pill last winter. They made peace with the world as it is now. Frankly I don't want to live anymore if everyone else is gone." She rubbed Will's shoulder. "I know it's not easy to accept. But you'll be surrounded by people who love you. In the meantime, think of who you want to see in the next few days, and what you want to say to them, and go say it."

It was long past midnight when Will's parents finally went to bed. They had sat together in the living room as a family, watching old reruns on television, and things had almost felt normal. Now Will remained with Luke and their dog.

"What do you think about all this?" Will asked.

Luke reclined on the couch, rubbing the aged golden retriever. "I'm just glad some things will be forgiven," he said.

"What do you mean?" Will asked, though he had an idea what Luke was referring to.

"Danny," Luke said quietly.

During the mayhem of the second year of winter gangs of roving pillagers had terrorized Drury, looting houses, stealing food and drugs and alcohol, guns and electronics. Only fourteen at the time, Luke had joined a group of local teenagers calling themselves the Celebrationists, in celebration of the end of the world. Danny Ward had been their next-door neighbor growing up, a year older than Luke and two years younger than Will, the three of them inseparable in their adventures. Luke had

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recruited Danny to join the Celebrationists, and together the gang had ransacked house after house, capitalizing on the chaos, while Will had been away at school. Will remembered his brother during those days, the dark inscrutable look in his eyes, the hunger for violent thrills. Will had retreated to college, hidden in his books and his classes, convincing himself that the madness of the age was only temporary, and everyone would snap out of it once the snows inevitably melted. But Luke only came around after the Celebrationists broke into old Mr. Davis' farmhouse, and Mr. Davis had surprised them with a shotgun. It had been dark, and Mr. Davis had mistaken Danny, a tall, lanky kid, for an adult, shooting him once in the base of the spine. Danny died on Mr. Davis' living room floor.

"I got him into all that shit," Luke said, pulling a joint out of his pocket. Tears formed at the corners of his eyes. "And I can't forgive myself."

"Bad things happened," Will said, thinking of how Danny's mother had hung herself soon after her son was killed. "Is that what you want to remember?"

"It's all I remember, Will," Luke said, lighting the joint.

"I remember when we were kids," Will said. "And Bart was just a puppy, and we used to have the run of this place. The yard, the woods, the creek. And we used to have those stupid little fights, fighting over toys and bikes, and nonsense. Remember what Dad told us? That one day he and Mom would be gone and all we'd have left was each other."

"I remember," Luke said, wiping his eyes. "Danny was with us lots of those times."

"And if Danny was the idea man," Will said. "He was the one who always wanted to build the fort, or go hiking in the woods. He would have a plan right now."

"Like Florida."

"Like Florida."

"Florida's covered in snow, Will. Everywhere's covered in snow."

"The snow will melt, Luke."

Luke took a long drag off his joint, ran his fingers through Bart's greying coat. "So what," he said.

The next day Will went to see Cora Payne. The Paynes lived on a farm about half a mile down the road from Will's house. The sky was white, with the sun almost peeking through the clouds. Will decided to ski to Cora's

house. He had always loved the gliding thrill of his cross country skis as he traversed the fields between their houses.

He found Cora in her bedroom, sitting on the floor in her pajamas, flipping through old photo albums. "This stuff doesn't mean anything to anyone but me," she said, indicating her stuffed animals and sports trophies and framed pictures. "I just can't stand the thought of somebody breaking in here and trashing my room just for the fun of it."

Will sat on the floor and helped her pack her possessions into boxes. He watched the way her wavy hair fell over her face as she moved. Such young hair. She would never be old, he realized, unless he managed to save her.

"Joe's coming over later," Cora said. "We're all coming to your party tomorrow, Will."

"It's not my party," Will said. She wasn't paying attention to him. She was holding a picture of her and Will and Joe from when they were ten or eleven, playing soccer together on the Drury youth team. He needed to get her out of her room, away from her things and her memories.

They went for a walk in the woods behind Cora's house. Will tried to think of how to broach the subject of Florida with her again. Cora had always been so easy to talk to, a natural companion. Even now she held his gloved hand in hers, as they gently stepped over fallen trees, and Will could feel a child's delicacy in her touch.

"I'm going to Florida," he told her. "I'll be at the party, but I'm not taking the Pill."

"Neither are we," Cora said. "Joey and I. I mean, we're going to the party. But we're not going to take the Pills with everyone else. We have a different plan."

"What?"

"I want to show you something."

She led him through the woods, and he knew where they were going. The tree house. Where the three of them had consummated their complicated friendship, and made a pledge to each other never to abandon their shared bond.

Will kept his mouth shut as they walked together. It was pleasant enough to be with Cora, to smell her and touch her. She belonged entirely to Joey now. The two of them had inched him out and formed a bonded pair, but he still felt the old longing to be near her.

His heart sank when they came upon the wreckage. The big tree trunk lay splayed on the ground like a giant baseball bat tossed behind the dugout

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after a game. What remained of the tree house lay in splinters poking out from the snow. Will saw a few errant planks of floorboard, a window frame, a petrified segment of carpet. Even a few of the shingles Mike Payne had hammered onto the roof were visible, but the tree house of Will's summer memories was gone.

"You remember that day?" Cora said. "We wrote each other letters, then buried them."

They had been fifteen. An August day that lasted a lifetime. The three of them had climbed the tree, sprawled out naked on the carpeted floor. He and Joey had made love to her. It was the first time for all of them. Cora's first two times.

"I wanted Joey first," Cora said. "Because I knew it would hurt, and because..." She drew in a deep breath, her eyes flickering to Will's before looking away. "Because I wanted it to be better with you. You were the one I wanted more back then, Will."

Will nodded. Back then.

"I thought we could just be a triad," Cora said. "Silly girl, but it seemed like it might work. You both loved me, and I loved you."

Loved.

"But then later you left," Cora said. "You went to college. Joe and I stayed in Drury. And you missed those years, Will, when everyone was dying. When everyone went insane. Joey was there for me then, and that's why I'm going to stay with him now."

"You can both come with me," Will said, perhaps a little too quickly. "I'm going to take my brother and head south. Why don't you come with us?"

Cora held her hand out to the ruined tree house, as if that was an answer. She smiled at him, but the smile was placating, no spark in her eyes.

"I feel like I'm in one of those nightmares," Will said. "Where you try to tell everyone something but no one will listen. You open your mouth and the words all come out garbled."

"We'll all wake up soon," Cora said. She stepped forward and touched Will's face. "We may not go with you, but you can come with us."

"What do you mean?"

"At the party, when everyone takes their Pills, just pretend to take yours, but don't really take it. When everyone else is having fun and drifting off we'll slip out and go our own way."

“Go where?” Will asked.

Her eyes seemed to see through him as she stepped forward and touched her cold lips to his cheek. “You’ll see.”

The party had been in full swing for about two hours when Susan called everyone together in the living room. They had served plenty of food, a roast turkey, leg of lamb, flank steak, potato salad, apple and blueberry and banana crème pies. Wine and beer and spirits flowed freely. Joints were passed around for those who wanted them. The survivors of six families gathered for one last Drury hoorah. The host family welcomed the Paynes, Mike, Angelie and Cora, the Marinellis, Joey and his younger brother Sam, their parents Richard and Marie, Danny Ward’s widowed father Frank from next door, as well as the Hofstras with their daughter Louise and son Martin, and all six members of the Van Huesen clan.

Will remembered the parties of his youth, when even more families had attended, gathering at someone’s house to celebrate Christmas, Memorial Day, or the Fourth of July. They had celebrated fortieth and fifties birthday parties, Jared Hofstra’s bar mitzvah, the wedding of Neyla Van Huesen to Brian Smith (the Smiths had taken their Pills the previous winter). In the old days the kids would have been running wild through the yard, chasing each other and playing games, while the adults drank and listened to music and danced, and three or four family dogs scavenged the grounds for fallen edibles.

Now everyone was relaxed and giddy, as if the house was a giant balloon released of its air. The woodstove roared and everyone was warm and red-faced in their sweaters. Children and teenagers were permitted sips of booze; their parents permitted themselves more than a sip.

Will stopped Luke in the kitchen as everyone filtered into the living room.

“Cora and Joey and I aren’t going to take the Pill,” Will whispered. “We’re going to slip away and go off on our own.”

“You are?” Luke said.

“When everyone swallows their Pills, just pretend to take yours,” Will said. “We’ll be here for Mom and Dad and the others, then once they’re gone we’ll be on our way.”

Luke swallowed a slug of whiskey, not his first of the day. Will saw the sadness in his brother’s eyes, and wrapped an arm around Luke’s shoulders.

“What’s the matter?” Will asked.

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"It doesn't seem right, Will," Luke said. "To trick Mom and Dad. They think we're all going out together."

"*They* made that decision, not us."

"I think we should be with them."

"What if the winter ends next year?" Will said. "It's not right to just give up."

"Will, Luke, we're ready now!" their mother called from the living room.

"We might not see green grass for five thousand years," Luke said. "Then what'll a few years in the caves down in Florida even matter?"

"I want you with me, brother," Will said. "It doesn't have to be over."

Luke rested his head against Will's shoulder for a moment, then the two of them walked into the living room where everyone was gathered.

"We are surrounded by family and friends," Susan began, and the crowd offered her teary encouragement as she recounted parties from the past. Will watched as the little red government-issued cases emerged from pockets all around the room. He heard the plastic clicks as the cases opened and closed, saw two dozen closed fists tightly clenching their Pills. Dutifully he pulled his own Pill from his pocket as his parents embraced in the center of the room, and other couples came forward to hold each other and kiss their children. Susan and George and Angelie Payne passed out Champaign flutes to everyone in the room, and as a group they toasted each other and their shared lives in Drury. "May we pass together into whatever awaits us," Susan said. "If you believe there is anything after. And if not, may you drink fondly to the time we spent here together."

Everyone raised their closed fists to their mouths, and washed down their Pills with Champaign.

Will dropped his own Pill quickly into his pocket, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Cora and Joey discretely do the same, standing together behind Will's father's armchair. When the flutes were empty everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. Will glanced over at Luke and nodded minutely, and his brother returned the nod, but quickly looked away.

"Well," said George, pulling a baggie of yellow powder from his pocket. "We have three more hours to have some fun, and I, for one, am going to do what I always said I would do if I found out I was going to die: shoot heroin."

This pronouncement was met by a round of gasps and sudden snorting laughs, but everyone was too drunk to really object. Even Susan shook her head as if this was just another of her husband's little eccentricities. The room began to fill with final declarations and strange last requests, and as drinks led to laughter and the music was turned up on the stereo, Will slipped casually out of the living room with Cora and Joey.

"Should we wait until they're getting sleepy?" Will asked, a lump in his throat nearly choking his words. The shame of the hidden Pill burned in his pocket.

"Let's go now," Cora said, taking each him and Joe by the hand.

"Wait, I have to get my brother," Will said.

"This is just for us," Cora said, and when he pulled away she smiled at him. "We'll see them soon."

She led him outside before he could object.

George and Mike Payne had never shot heroin before, but they were able to procure accurate usage instruction from twenty-six year-old Martin Hofstra, who, like many present, used his last three hours to confess a number of secrets previously unknown to his family, one of which was a brief period of heroin use. George and Mike, once the injections hit home, then produced a chess board and attempted to settle once and for all a lifelong chess rivalry.

"Best of three, you old brute," George said, clapping Mike on the arm. "And then that's it, we'll never play again."

"I can't even feel my hands, George," Mike said, and they both laughed. "How am I supposed to play chess?"

Meanwhile Susan absconded to the front hallway with Charles Van Huesen, away from the rest of the party, and stood with him staring out the front windows at the long white slope of the hillside leading down to the road. For years Susan and Charles had exchanged meaningful glances at countless parties, had taken little escapes from the rest of the crowd to talk in private, had graced each other with dozens of fleeting New Year's Eve kisses. But now Susan's hand found her way into Charles' as she leaned toward him, a warmth beginning to flow through her entire body.

"I suppose it's now or never, Charlie," she whispered, as Charles Van Huesen loosened his tie. "The bedroom's upstairs."

"I'm not sure Gladys will object," Charles replied. "Yesterday she told me about a fling she had years ago. Fine thing to find out on your second-to-last day of life."

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“It’s all in the wind now,” Susan said. “Though I guess I’d better go tell George.”

Will, Cora and Joe ran across the snowy field away from Will’s house. The cold air burned their lungs. Will still did not know specifically where they were going, and regretted not telling his mother and father one more time that he loved them. But he knew that if he was going to survive this madness, and last through interminable winters underground, he would have to grow tough. He would lose almost everyone he knew, but he would soldier on. As long as he had Cora and his brother he believed he could make it.

They ran the half mile to Cora’s house under a brilliant sun. The snow glistened around them. Will hoped they were stopping off to get supplies for the journey to wherever they were going, before returning to his own house to collect Luke. But instead they went into Cora’s barn, and Joey grabbed a pair of shovels, handed one to Will.

“Where are we going?” Will asked.

“To the treehouse,” Cora said. “To dig up our letters.”

Susan had to shake her husband’s shoulder twice before he looked up at her. Deep in their heroin nod, George and Mike had only moved two or three pieces of their penultimate chess match, and had spent most of half an hour grinning at each other and laughing.

“I said I’m going to ask you for a favor,” Susan told George again.

“Shoot,” said George.

Susan stood up to her full height, about five-foot-four, as if she needed all the courage she could muster. “I’m going to sleep with Charlie,” she said. “We have only three hours left and we’ve wanted to do it for years, but never did. I’ve always been faithful to you.”

George peered at her strangely, his drug-addled mind processing everything on a delay. “What?” he said eventually.

“I think you heard me.” Susan placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not angry at you for anything, George. You’ve always been a good husband. This is just something I want to do.”

“You don’t want to do it with me?” he asked.

“Oh, come on now, we’ve done more than our share.”

George stared at his wife, turned to Mike, could not help himself from grinning. Everything seemed funny. And sleepy. George dug his

walkie-talkie out of his pocket and radioed Mike. "You hear this?" he asked.

Mike replied into his own radio. "Ten-four."

They both started laughing again. George clapped his wife solidly on her pillowy rump. "Go on with it then," he said with a shrug.

Susan pinched his arm and hurried away before anyone could object to what she was doing, including her.

They hacked at the hard ground at the base of the tree that had once held their tree house, the three of them taking turns with the shovels.

"It wasn't that deep, I don't think," Cora said, sweat beading on her forehead.

"Ground's frozen solid," Joe said.

After what must have been at least an hour, Will finally heard the blade of his shovel clink against something metallic. Together they pried the cookie tin out of the concrete earth. It had rusted, and the image of cookies on the lid had faded, but inside they found their letters to each other sealed in plastic zip-lock bags.

Will stood in the silent forest and remembered the day they had written the letters. He and Joey had each written to Cora and she had written to each of them. He could not recall his words, only knew that his heart had been racing as he wrote them, his body pulsing from sex, Cora stretched out naked beside him, committing her own thoughts to eternity.

"We said we wouldn't open them till we were fifty," Joe said, holding his letter to Cora.

"I think we better do it now," Cora said. "Who wants to go first?"

"I'll go first," Joe said, winking at her. "I went first last time."

They sat down on the fallen tree and opened the letters. Joe read his letter to Cora, and then Cora read hers back to him, and Will sat on the cold trunk and felt miles away from the two of them. He had missed a great deal in the five years since the letters were written. When his friends finished they gave each other a tearful hug and a deep kiss, and Will felt even more excluded. Like he was watching all of this in a dream. Who were these winter thieves, digging up a summer grave? He wanted to leave, find his brother and head south. They shouldn't be here, he thought. They were intruders. This memory was buried.

"Your turn, Will," Cora said, squeezing his hand. "Do you want to go first or should I?"

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If it was going to happen, Will wanted to read his letter first. He now suspected that Cora and Joey weren't going anywhere with him, and if he was going to lose her, he wanted her words to echo in his ears, untarnished by his own quivering mumbles.

For the first hour or so after the Pill ceremony Luke wandered the party, drinking with old friends, listening to increasingly inane retellings of stories he had heard many times, giving and receiving hugs which began as casual embraces and turned into shoulder-grasping clings. He knew there was no avoiding the conversation he must have. There would be no words tomorrow.

He walked slowly through the house until he found Frank Ward sitting alone in the little room off the dining room that his mother used for reading. Frank sat in a rocking chair with his eyes closed, and Luke worried he might already be gone, until he saw that Frank was gently pushing the chair back and forth by leveraging his toe against the floor.

"Frank?" Luke asked, looming in the doorway.

Frank Ward opened his eyes. A misty smile spread across his face.

"What's up, my boy?" Frank said. He had always used this familiar term with Luke, just as he had done with Danny.

"Frank, I wanted to apologize for what happened to Danny," Luke said, trying to meet the older man's eyes.

Frank furrowed his brow and kept rocking in the chair.

"I mean I've wanted to apologize for a long time," Luke clarified.

"Luke, I appreciate that," said Danny's father.

"I always felt responsible."

"Well, you shouldn't. Especially not now."

Frank held up his tired hands. "Where was I in those days, Luke? Where was his father when he needed guidance? When everyone needed guidance?"

"I don't know why we acted like savages," Luke said.

"In our blood we are all savages," Frank said. "Because we are afraid of uncertainty." Then he spread out his arms. "But look at us now. Facing certain death we can be noble. We have all come together to remember the good times, to surround ourselves with the ones we love, to forgive each other for any wrongdoing. If it's forgiveness you want, my boy, I forgive you. It would be absurd not to."

Luke felt tears building behind his eyes. He wanted to hug Danny's father, and Frank seemed to sense this, for he stood and wrapped his arms

around Luke, held him as his own father had held him many times.

“We’ll see him soon anyway,” Frank said, releasing Luke.

Luke had never really given this idea much thought. He did not want to spoil Frank Ward’s beliefs in their last hour or so of life, but personally he did not believe there was anything waiting for them afterward. He now worried what he would say if he saw Danny again. Would all be forgiven, or did the dead hold a grudge? Or did you wake up somewhere foggy and warm and forget everything you’d done in life?

“Thanks for listening to me,” Luke said.

Frank clapped him on the arms, then settled back into the rocking chair. Luke left Frank Ward in the reading room and went to look for his dog.

Will sat shivering on the fallen tree trunk and stared at his own shaky penmanship. Cora and Joey sat next to him, holding hands, patiently waiting for him to begin.

“Dear C,” Will said, reading the letter. He almost could not continue. “Hello from the future! Or the past, since the future will be the present I guess. Anyway if you’re reading this it means we are fifty. I wonder if your parents will still own this land or if we will have to trespass to dig up our letters. I’m sorry I’m rambling a little, I don’t know what to say. Hopefully we are still friends, or more than friends. Hopefully we have not been killed in tragic farming accidents, like that guy in Buxton who was impaled—”

He skipped over a few bloody details.

“I don’t know what to say to you since I don’t know whether Joey will be hearing this or not.”

He glanced up at Cora and Joe.

“It’s okay,” Joe said.

Luke turned back to his letter, the paper shaking in his gloved hand. “I hope one day, Cora, it will just be the two of us. No offense to Joey. I know you said you loved both of us, but I just don’t see how it is possible to love two people at once. I hope someday you will pick one of us, and it will be me. Joey is a good guy, but it was hard for me to watch him with you. I could only do it ‘cause I knew I would get to be with you too. So which one of us was better? Just kidding, don’t answer. Sorry. I love you, Cora. I will still love you when you read this letter, even if we are fifty, even if you marry that dirty fat guy Anthony from the Mobil Station like you jokingly said you would that time, even if I end up playing third base for the Seattle Mariners and I’m never around. I will always love you. Your friend, Will.”

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His letter felt shamefully inadequate, a child's confessional. He remember watching Cora diligently scribbling her letters in the tree house that day, a content grin on her face, while he struggled to put down the first words. Now Cora looked at him with that same quiet smile, her wide eyes dripping tears.

"Thank you, Will," she said.

She produced her own letter from its faded envelope and began to read.

"Dear Will, Right now you look so cute with your hair hanging over your eyes. I love your long hair. Never cut it! That's an order! I kinda want you again already but I'm also kind of in pain. Not too much though. Doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. Next time probably won't hurt at all. So they say.

"Do you feel older now that we've had sex? I don't really, but we'll see what happens when school starts next month. Do you think people will know? We all knew when Casey Morgan did it, of course she did tell everyone.

"For some reason what we just did reminds me of a lot of random things: I'm thinking of the time when we were like eight or nine maybe and we went to the Y in Utica for swimming lessons. And we had never been there before, it was our first lesson, and we were afraid to change into our bathing suits in the locker rooms because they were full of adults and strangers. So you and I changed in that handicapped bathroom. Remember how we wore towels around ourselves while we changed so we wouldn't see each other? So modest hahaha! Well, at the time I kinda wanted to take off my towel.... Did you ever think of me that way?

"I'm also thinking about other times, like Valentine's Day in sixth grade, back when we had to get Valentine's cards for everyone, even the dweebs we didn't like, so we always got those stupid little kid valentines with Garfield on them and just gave them to everyone. But you gave me a card you had drawn yourself and taped a pair of zirconia earrings to it. I was SO embarrassed, and I know you were too, because everyone was whispering and laughing. Little Romeo.... But I still have those earrings, Will."

She stopped reading and pointed to her ears, and Will saw, to his mild shock, that she was wearing the earrings, a gift he had forgotten giving to her. Now his own ears filled with hot blood as he saw her wearing them. Joe laughed and tapped the earrings with his finger.

Cora resumed reading. "There's a whole bunch of other stuff I'm thinking about Will—my mind is racing—but I don't think I have enough paper to write everything down. Sorry. Guess you'll never know. Wink.

I love you, buddy. This is supposed to be a love letter, so I better say I love you. Hopefully this will not be the only time you ever hear me tell you. Your friend, Coraline Payne.”

Will was staring at the snow through blurry eyes when he felt Cora’s arms around him. He hugged her back, stiffly at first, self-conscious, then he grasped the smooth nylon of her jacket and pulled her close. He realized that she had not mentioned Joey once in her letter. Maybe what she had told him yesterday was true, that she had wanted him more back then.

“Can I keep the letter?” Will asked quietly.

“Of course,” said Cora. She handed him the paper. He folded it carefully into the envelope and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

“Are we ready?” Joe asked.

“I think so,” Cora said, sitting beside her boyfriend and taking his hand.

Will stood up to leave. It was time to get back to his house, tell his parents goodbye, round up Luke and their supplies.

“Where are you going?” Joe asked.

“What?” Will said. “Home.”

He looked down and saw that they were both holding their Pills in their open hands.

“Let’s do it here,” Cora said.

“No,” Will said, feeling his feet leading him backwards, away from them. “We’re going to Florida.”

Cora and Joe shook their heads, smiling at Will. Before Will could say anything they popped their Pills into their mouths and swallowed.

“What are you doing?” Will cried. He lunged at Cora, tackling her into the snow. He would punch her stomach and make her vomit. But Joe pulled him off her, pinned him to the ground. Cora was crying now, reaching for Will. “Get off me!” Will yelled, and Joe let him up. Will staggered to his feet. His chest felt hot and tight, like he was suffocating. “You weren’t supposed to do that,” he muttered, and before he knew what was happening he found himself running back through the forest, his boots crunching in the snow, the icy air piercing his lungs.

When they were finished with their clipped, hurried love-making, Susan and Charles Van Heusen rose from the bed and started putting on their clothes. Susan felt light-headed and happy in an abstract way, but now

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that it was over she wanted to get out of her bedroom, and possibly never set foot in it again.

“How, uh, how was it?” Charles asked. It seemed like a pertinent question.

“Oh, I think we woke the dead, babe,” Susan said with a wink. She kissed him quickly. In moments they were fully clothed again, the mystery and thrill of nakedness gone. “But the hour is drawing nigh, and I think I’d like to spend the rest of it with my husband.”

They held hands on their way down the stairs, but separated before returning to the party. Susan drifted over to the chess game, where her husband was down to his king, a rook, and a pawn, while Mike had only a bishop and a knight to protect his monarch. It looked like this one might end in a stalemate.

Will huffed into the living room and found his parents sitting together over the game at the coffee table. People were now sitting rather than standing, slumped on the couch or in chairs or leaning against the wall, either from drunkenness or the Pill or general surrender. Will’s whole body seemed to ache. He was thirsty and out of breath, but he needed to find his brother. He did not see Luke anywhere in the living room.

“Will, are you all right?” his mother asked, standing and taking Will’s face in her hands.

“I’m okay, I was just outside,” Will croaked, his voice almost gone.

“They say it has no side effects,” his mother said. “Other than the obvious. Would you like me to make you some tea, or something?”

“No!” Will cried. His father and Mike both looked up at him. “I don’t need you to do anything,” he said. “I’m sorry. I just want my brother.”

“He’s around here somewhere,” Susan said, gazing around the room.

“He took Bart for a walk,” George said.

Will could not look at them. He knew their end was near. It had been over two hours. He quickly shuffled back out of the living room.

“Bring him back inside, will you?” his mother called after him.

Outside, Will scanned the vast horizon of their property for his brother. He felt panic rising in his chest, and he took several deep breaths. The cold seemed to cut into his body. On the ground he saw two sets of tracks in the snow, one from a human, and a second from a dog. Will realized where Luke must be.

On the edge of the property was a creek where as children Will and Luke and Danny used to build forts and play their adventure and war games. Bart had always served as their lookout. Will trudged through the hard-packed snow toward the creek. Clouds were creeping into the sky overhead, overcasting the sparkling blue with a dull, thick grey. Snow was coming soon, like a celestial cleaning crew, to wash them all away as soon as the party was over.

Luke sat in a little clearing at the edge of the frozen creek. Bart lay on the ground beside him, his head resting in Luke's lap, his body slack from the injection Luke had given him. Luke smiled as Will approached, and Bart lethargically wagged his tail.

"Luke," Will said, bending over to catch his breath.

"Thought you went off with Cora and Joey," said Luke.

"I did... but..."

"Are they... gone?"

Will nodded. He did not know what to say.

"Snow's coming," Luke said absently. "Not for a few hours though."

"Luke. We should get back to the house. They're almost gone. We should be with them."

"I think I'll stay here," Luke said. "This is what I want to remember."

"What do you mean?"

Luke waved his hand across the creek. "This is where we used to build our forts. You and me and Danny. All those summers. That's what I want to think about."

"You'll have plenty of time to think about that," Will said. "It's a long way to Florida, and we may be underground for years."

"Will," Luke said, his eyes red but no longer teary. "I'm not going to Florida. I took my Pill like everyone else."

Will felt his legs go numb. He had been trying to stay on his feet, knowing that to sit down or stop moving would mean to accept everyone's decision, to support them all in their surrender. Now he half-tumbled to the ground beside his brother. Tears poured from his eyes, freezing on his cheeks.

"Why did you do that?" Will whispered.

Luke stared down at the frozen creek. "Because it will never be like it was," he said. "Even if everything thaws, and the world goes back to

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normal, it will never be like we remember. But if we get one memory to take with us, I want it to be this. Our summer days at the creek with you and me and Danny and Bart.” He stroked the golden retriever’s head. “What do you want to remember, Will? What do you want to take with you?”

Will had not considered that his memory might come to an end. All he had thought about was getting Luke and heading south, to soldier on, come what may. “I think about all the things I haven’t done yet,” he said.

“Did you take the Pill?” Luke asked.

“No.”

“It will be worse if you don’t. Trying to survive another winter with no money or resources. You’ll freeze or starve. And you’ll be alone.”

“I am alone!” Will shouted.

Luke reached out and took Will’s hand. Together they sat in silence for a long time, their breath seeping into the air in cloudy puffs. Around them the sky darkened, and the forest became fuzzy and grey. Bart closed his eyes in Luke’s lap and lay still.

Will did not notice the moment his brother slipped away. Eventually he felt Luke’s cold, stiff hand, saw his eyes were closed. Snowflakes drifted down from the sky.

Will stood on frozen, shaky legs. He stared back across the long yard to the house, which was silent now. No sounds from the party. He thought of his parents eternally asleep in the living room, and knew he could not go back in there, could not return to a cold house full of dead people. There was only one place he knew that would still be warm, and if he started walking he could probably get there ahead of the brunt of the storm. He realized now that his mother had been right, that it was not worth living anymore if everyone else was gone. In their dying moments everyone he loved had wanted him by their side, and this thought filled him with a surprising sense of calm.

He reached into his jacket pocket and felt two things, one the soft little red Pill, the other his letter from Cora. Will decided he would go to Elmo’s Tavern and drink whiskey and read Cora’s letter and think of all the little secrets her words implied. Memories true and imagined. The summer days of the mind.

He swallowed his Pill dry. It tasted vaguely of caramel. In a moment it was gone, down his throat to his stomach. He wrapped his scarf around his face and started walking to town.