



ENCHANTED GLASSES

A Novel in Songs

STEVE KEITH

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BASELINES DESIGNS

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Lyrics and music by Steve Keith.

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For Patty, Steve and Rudy,
the enchantment in my life.

Without the pain there is no gain
You've got to keep on looking through
Enchanted Glasses

— the guy in the subway

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PART ONE

Signals

1957–1969

The first thing Leo Marsh ever remembered was being lifted out of bed in the dark.

It was October 1957, and he was three. His father carried him down the back steps of the two-family house on Clifton Street in Malden, past the clothesline, out to the middle of the yard where the grass was already wet. On the other side of the fence, Mr. Delvecchio stood in his undershirt with his face turned up. Up and down the street, other fathers were doing the same thing.

"Watch," his father said. "Right there. It's moving."

Leo saw nothing but stars, and then he saw one of them walk. A small, steady light, sliding across the dark like it had somewhere to be.

"The Russians put that up," his father said. He didn't sound angry or afraid. He sounded the way he did when he looked at an engine he couldn't fix yet. "A man built that, Leo. Remember that."

Frank Marsh had come home from Germany in 1945 with a Purple Heart he kept in a sock drawer and a silence he kept everywhere else. He worked days at the General Electric River Works in Lynn, machining parts for jet engines he wasn't allowed to talk about either. Leo's mother, Helen, said Frank had two speeds: quiet and asleep.

The television came the next spring, a blond-wood Admiral that took a full minute to warm up, the picture blooming out of a white dot in the middle of the glass. Leo's grandfather, Pop, who lived upstairs, refused to trust it. He had come back from France in 1918 and had trusted very little since. He kept his Philco radio on the kitchen windowsill and listened to the Red Sox on it even when the game was on TV in the next room. But in the evenings he came down and sat in the armchair with the rest of them, because the whole world was coming in through that glass now, and even Pop didn't want to miss it.

Leo grew up in front of it. He watched one candidate sweat under the studio lights and another one who didn't. He heard Pop laugh until he coughed about a Russian who banged his shoe on a desk at the United Nations. He watched a woman in a pillbox hat smile at all of it as if it would go on forever. He didn't understand much. He under-

stood that the light was coming from somewhere far away, and that it was changing everyone who looked at it.

In the summer of 1962, the lights in the sky started talking back.

On a hot Monday afternoon in July, Pop came downstairs at a quarter to three, switched on the Admiral without asking anybody, and sat down in front of it with his hands on his knees like a man in church. Leo was eight. His mother brought a pitcher of lemonade and stayed in the kitchen doorway with a dish towel over her shoulder. Two weeks earlier, Pop explained, the telephone company had sent up a new satellite called Telstar, a ball almost three feet across covered in little solar cells, and today it was going to carry live television across the ocean for the first time. Not film flown over on an airplane. Live, right now, while it was happening.

Chet Huntley came on from New York, and Leo, who saw him every night at supper, had never seen him look so much like a boy on Christmas morning. Then the picture jumped and steadied, and it was a ballgame: the Cubs and the Phillies at Wrigley Field, a Phillies batter lifting a lazy fly ball to right field, and the Cubs' right fielder drifting over to catch it. The President wasn't ready yet, somebody explained, so they were sending Europe a baseball game in the meantime. Pop laughed until he had to wipe his eyes with his handkerchief. "Two thousand years of civilization over there," he said, "and the first thing we show them is the Cubs."

Later the President spoke about the dollar, which Leo did not understand. And then the pictures came the other way. A man with a British accent said good evening, though it was afternoon in Malden, and suddenly there was the Eiffel Tower, standing in the long gold light of a summer evening in Paris, live, in their living room. Pop got up and turned the dial to see if CBS had it too, and there was Walter Cronkite in his heavy black glasses, looking as amazed as anybody.

That night the evening news ran the Paris pictures again. Frank Marsh had come through France in the summer of 1944, when it was on fire. When the tower came on the screen, he put his fork down and watched people strolling along the river and sitting at little round tables outside the cafés, and he didn't say anything for a long time.

Then he said, "Look at that. They're just sitting there." It was the most Leo had ever heard him say about France.

After supper, Leo went out to the back porch to look for Telstar. He never found it. He stayed out there an hour anyway, listening to the crickets, sure that somewhere over his head a shining ball was passing pictures from one side of the world to the other, and that from now on nothing that happened anywhere would ever be very far away again.

That December, a song called "Telstar" came out of Pop's Philco, a strange, swooping instrumental with no words at all, and Pop turned it up every time.

Awakening



3:43

Listen on Bandcamp · Watch on YouTube

The whole world was painted
Black and white.
Then a spark was struck
A brand new satellite.
The sixties roared in
With a Paisley tie.
A sleek shining eye
Opened up the sky.

Elvis sings a million miles away
Electrons paint a cultural display
Across the oceans
Come signals uniting, dividing
Over the years
It will continue providing

Milhous wipes his brow
J F K speaks For the world
Nickie bangs his shoe
Jackie smiles, not impressed

Our footsteps were etched for eternity
A new world will build a fraternity

We've thrived on those signals of dreams
We've strived to make sense of those beams
Derangement could always ignite
Our motives must always burn bright

⁂

The year before, for his seventh birthday in April 1961, Pop had given him a telescope. It was a forty-power refractor from Sears with a tripod that wobbled if you breathed on it. Pop set it up on the back porch and taught Leo the only constellation he knew.

"That one's you," Pop said, steering the tube toward a backward question mark of stars high in the spring sky. "The Lion. See the mane? That bright one at the bottom is his heart. Regulus. Means *little king*." He clapped Leo on the back of the neck. "Don't let it go to your head."

Leo spent the next two years on that porch. He learned the Summer Triangle and the Dipper and the faint smudge in Andromeda that his library book said was a whole other galaxy, two million light-years away. He liked that the light he was looking at had left before there were people. It made the yard feel smaller and the world feel larger, and both of those were comforts.

In the summer of 1963, hunting for his father's fishing tackle in the cellar, he pried open an olive-drab footlocker with **MARSH F.J.** stenciled on the lid. Under a folded uniform that smelled like mothballs, he found a thick book with a black cover and a gold eagle stamped on the front. The words inside were German. He was turning the pages when he heard the cellar stairs creak.

His father didn't yell. He took the book out of Leo's hands, gently, the way you take a match from a child, and stood there holding it under the bare bulb. The gold eagle caught the light.

"I took this out of a house outside Munich," he said. "The people who lived there had it on the nightstand. Everybody had one." He was quiet for so long that Leo thought that was the end of it. Then he said, "They told everyone exactly what they were going to do. Nobody read it."

He put the book back under the uniform, closed the footlocker, and snapped the lock. They never spoke of it again.

That November, Leo was nine and in the fourth grade at the Linden School. On a Friday afternoon the principal's voice came over the loudspeaker, strange and thin, and then the teachers were crying in the hallway and everyone was sent home. Leo walked in to find his mother standing at the ironing board, not ironing. Pop was in the kitchen with his ear against the Philco. And at three o'clock, which had never happened before and would never happen again, his father came through the front door in his work clothes in the middle of a shift.

They sat in front of the Admiral. On CBS, Walter Cronkite was in his shirtsleeves, reading bulletins handed to him off camera. Then a sheet of paper came, and he read it, and he took off his heavy black glasses and looked up at a clock on the wall, and he told the country the President was dead. His voice caught. He put the glasses back on and kept going, because that was the job.

Leo never forgot the glasses. A grown man who knew everything took them off, and for a moment he didn't know anything at all, and then he put them back on and went on seeing the world for everybody else.

Pop said, "God help us." His father said nothing. But he reached over and took Leo's mother's hand, and Leo had never seen him do that, either.

On regular nights, at supper, the family watched Huntley and Brinkley on NBC. When the broadcast ended, Leo would say, "Good night, Chet," and his father, without looking up from his plate, would answer, "Good night, David." It was the only game Frank Marsh ever played. Leo didn't say it for weeks after that Friday. When he finally did, in December, his father answered the same as always. It didn't sound like a game anymore. It sounded like something you say to a man because you might not see him again.

Good Night Chet



2:47

Listen on Bandcamp · Watch on YouTube

This world is such a stage for tragedy
Careening in a vast expanse
We bounce from high to low
Thrown by a sudden glance
Curtails our own slow dance
In darkness we advance
We carry on we take a chance

When I was young
I heard an old man
talking in a mournful voice
Didn't understand the news
The world just paused

Why do we have to keep repeating
all the hateful things we do?
It escalates until we break

As we descend into the darkest times
A ray of hope begins to pierce
the darkness surrounding us
Saving us, from ourselves

When I was young
I heard an old man
talking in a mournful voice
Didn't understand the news
The world just paused

⁂

The rest of the decade came through the glass the way that Friday had: a little at a time, then all at once. Leo kept his telescope, and the fall he started high school, his father came home from River Works and set a slide rule on the kitchen table beside his plate: a ten-inch Keuffel & Esser, ivory-colored and worn smooth at the edges, in a brown leather case with F.J.M. scratched into it. Frank didn't say where it came from or what it was for. He just tapped it twice and went upstairs to wash. Leo wore it in the leather case on his belt like a gunfighter. He was good at math the way some boys were good at baseball, without trying and without telling anyone.

In July 1969 the whole family sat in front of the Admiral again and watched a man step onto the moon. Pop, who was eighty-one, wept openly. Frank Marsh stood behind the couch with his arms folded

and said, very quietly, "A man built that." Leo was fifteen. He knew exactly what he wanted to be.

He did not become it. That is not the same as saying he didn't get there.

INTERLUDE

Grounded

1970–1977

The first thing to go was the blackboard.

In the fall of 1970, in Mr. Sheehan's physics class at Malden High, Leo sat in the third row and copied down equations he could no longer quite read. He squinted. He moved up a row, then another, until he was sitting in the front with the kids who asked questions, and he hated it. He told no one. He was sixteen, he had read that test pilots had perfect eyes, and he had decided that if he never said it out loud, it wasn't true.

The school nurse found him out in November with an eye chart and a paper cup held over one eye. The optometrist in Malden Square confirmed it a week later, in a dark little room that smelled of lens cleaner: mild nearsightedness, nothing serious, nothing most people would ever notice. He fitted Leo with a pair of heavy black frames that made him look, his mother said, like a young Walter Cronkite.

"Is it going to get better?" Leo asked.

"It might get a little worse," the optometrist said cheerfully. "Then it'll stop. You'll only need them for driving and the movies."

Then Leo asked the question he had really come to ask. The optometrist was a kind man, and he took his time answering. The Air Force, he said, wanted its pilots to see perfectly without any help at all. Maybe someday that would change. He didn't think it would be soon.

That night Leo carried Pop's telescope out to the back porch and didn't use it. He took the new glasses off, and the stars over the clothesline went soft, every one a little smear of light. He put them back on, and the stars came back sharp, all of them at once, and he understood that from now on he would only ever see the sky through glass.

Pop found him out there an hour later, lowered himself into the other chair with a groan, and didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "Your father doesn't fly the jets either. He builds the engines." He tapped the black frames on Leo's face with one finger. "Somebody's got to build the thing, little king."

Frank said nothing at all. But the next Saturday he came home from the plant with a cardboard box of broken radio parts and set it

down on the kitchen table in front of his son without a word, the same way he had once taken a book out of his hands. Leo had a working radio by Christmas.

He wore the glasses to drive and to the movies and nowhere else. The rest of the time they lived folded in his shirt pocket, and he got used to a world that was very slightly out of focus at the edges, and after a while he stopped noticing.

⁂

The guitar came the next summer. Leo spent July and August of 1971 bagging groceries at a supermarket in Malden Square and spent every dollar of it, plus twenty borrowed from Pop, on a scratched secondhand Martin in a music store on Massachusetts Avenue. He taught himself out of a chord book and off the Philco, slowing songs down in his head until he could catch them. The guitar did not care about his eyes. It turned out that he could hear the way some people could see, and when he played, the blurred edges of the world didn't matter at all.

Before the summer was out, he had written his first song. It was about Telstar, the shining ball he had stood on the back porch hunting for when he was eight, and it took him a dozen tries to get right. He wrote it in a green clothbound notebook from the five-and-dime, and he kept writing, in that notebook and the ones after it, for the rest of his life. Some songs he wrote the night things happened. Some took him years. That winter he wrote one about the Huntley-Brinkley sign-off, and his father saying it back across the supper table, and he didn't show that one to anybody.

In the spring of his senior year, Mr. Sheehan brought something to class in a padded box: a Hewlett-Packard pocket calculator, the first anyone at Malden High had ever seen, which had cost the science department almost four hundred dollars. He passed it around the room. It did square roots and logarithms, sines and cosines, in less time than it took Leo to slide the rule out of its case. Leo held it the longest. Then he passed it on, unbuckled the leather case from his belt, and

put the slide rule in his book bag. He never wore it again. He told people later that it was like watching a horse see its first automobile.

In June the band played "Pomp and Circumstance" on the football field. Leo crossed the stage in a borrowed gown with his glasses in his pocket, and up in the bleachers Pop, eighty-four years old, stood and whistled through his fingers until Helen pulled him back down. Frank didn't whistle. Afterward he shook his son's hand, held on a little longer than usual, and said, "Northeastern. Engineering. Good."

⁂

Leo spent the next five years at Northeastern University on Huntington Avenue, in the co-op program that sent engineering students out to work six months at a stretch. He did one stint at a defense contractor in Burlington that made him sign papers he wasn't allowed to talk about, which made him think of his father, and another at a little company in Wakefield that built control boards for hospital equipment. He liked the Wakefield job so much that they hired him the week he graduated. He lived in a string of apartments in Somerville and Allston with roommates who came and went. He played the Martin at parties until somebody asked him to play at a coffeehouse, and then somebody else asked him to come back.

In June 1977 he graduated again. Pop, eighty-nine, stood up in the auditorium and whistled again. Frank shook his hand again, a little longer this time.

Some nights, walking home from the coffeehouse across the river, Leo would stop in the middle of the bridge, take the glasses out of his shirt pocket, and put them on just to look up. There might be a planet low in the west, or a jet blinking its way down toward Logan, or nothing at all. He didn't feel sorry for himself anymore, not exactly. He had decided that some people go to the sky, and some people build the things that go, and some people just stand on bridges and look up. He hadn't figured out yet which one he was.

PART TWO

Fire

1977–1985

By the fall of 1977, Leo was twenty-three, a junior engineer at a firm in Wakefield that designed control boards for hospital equipment, and the owner of a secondhand Martin guitar he played every Thursday at a basement coffeehouse in Harvard Square. The slide rule was in a drawer. Hewlett-Packard had killed it with a pocket calculator the year he graduated from high school, and he had not yet forgiven them.

Carla Benedetti came to hear somebody else play. She stayed for him. She was a painting student at MassArt with a red wool scarf, paint under her fingernails, and a laugh that started low and went somewhere you wanted to follow. After his set she told him his second song was too long and his third one wasn't long enough, and she was right about both.

They walked across the Longfellow Bridge after his early set, the sky over the river still holding the last deep blue of evening. Low in the west there was a thin crescent moon with a single bright star beside it, like a diamond stud in an ear. Leo, who knew it was actually Venus, decided not to say so. He kissed her instead.

She gave him her number. Her father, a lawyer in Wellesley, had bought her one of the first telephone answering machines Leo had ever heard of, a beige box the size of a toaster. For seven days, every time he called, he got the same cheerful recording of her voice. He memorized every syllable of it. On the fourth night he got in his car to drive past her apartment on Mission Hill, made it as far as the Fenway, and turned around.

On the sixth night, instead of calling, he wrote a song about it on the back of a set list, and he played it at the coffeehouse that Thursday without telling anyone who it was for.

Like a Moth to a Flame



3:21

Listen on Bandcamp

There was a crescent moon
With a diamond stud
When I first kissed your lips
And when I touched your hair
A charge ran through my fingertips.

As I opened up my eyes
I saw your smiling face
There was no sign of motive there
I couldn't find a trace
So I said goodnight
And headed for home
Thanking the Lord
for my Y chromosome.

After seven long days
It is etched in my brain
That greeting on your
Answering machine.

Like a moth to a flame
This could kill me tonight
The more things change
The more they stay the same.

Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight
Come on pretty lady
Make me feel all right
Pick up on the call
Honey end my plight
Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight.

Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight
Come on pretty baby
Make me feel all right
Pick up on the call
Honey end my plight
Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight.

I should drive
Down your street
Dressed in full stealth mode

But that's kinda creepy
And against my code.

After seven long days
It is etched in my brain
That greeting on your
Answering machine.

Like a moth to a flame
This could kill me tonight
The more things change
The more they stay the same.

Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight
Come on pretty lady
Make me feel all right
Pick up on the call
Honey end my plight
Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight.

Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight
Come on pretty baby
Make me feel all right
Pick up on the call
Honey end my plight
Like a moth to a flame
Gonna burn tonight.



On the eighth day she picked up. She had been in Provincetown painting dunes, she said, and hadn't checked her messages, and was he the guitar player or the other one?

They were together for a year and a half. Leo would later say it was the happiest he had ever been and the most frightened, and that he did not understand at the time that those were the same thing. Carla painted him asleep, painted him playing, painted the view from his Somerville kitchen window eleven times in eleven kinds of weather. He wrote her songs she pretended not to like.

The first time she painted him, he made the mistake of putting on his glasses so he could watch what she was doing.

"Take those off," she said, without looking up from the canvas. "You look like a tax accountant."

He took them off. Across her little studio on Mission Hill, the canvas went soft at the edges, and so did she: a red scarf, a dark tangle of hair, a brush moving fast. He told her he couldn't see a thing past ten feet without them. She stopped painting and looked at him over the easel for a long moment.

"That's how I look at everything when I'm working," she said. "I squint until the edges go. Then you can see where the light really is." She went back to the canvas. "You walk around all day seeing like a painter, and you don't even know it."

Nobody had ever told him his eyes were good for anything before. He kept the glasses in his pocket for most of the next year and a half.

⁂

In February 1978 the blizzard came. It started on a Monday afternoon and didn't stop for a day and a half, and by Wednesday there were cars buried and abandoned all along Route 128, and the governor had closed the roads to everyone. Carla had come over to Somerville for dinner on Monday night. She couldn't get home for a week.

It was the best week of his life. They ate everything in the cupboards, then everything in the downstairs neighbors' cupboards. She painted the kitchen window four times in four kinds of snow light.

He played her every song he knew and three he made up on the spot. At night they walked down the middle of Somerville Avenue, where there were no cars at all, only people on cross-country skis and kids on sleds and a silence so complete you could hear the snow landing on your coat.

On the last night, lying on the floor in front of the radiator, she told him her painting teacher had said she belonged in New York. She said it lightly, the way you mention the weather. Leo heard everything underneath it, and he did the thing he would regret most about Carla, which was nothing. He said New York was a great town to visit. She laughed and threw a pillow at him, and the moment went by.

⁂

That summer they drove to Provincetown in his rattling Plymouth, and she set up her easel in the dunes and painted for six hours straight while he lay on a towel and read and watched her. She didn't eat. She didn't talk. Once he walked over with a sandwich and stood beside her for a full minute before she noticed he was there. It wasn't unkindness. She had gone somewhere he couldn't follow, somewhere inside the work, and she was happier there than he had ever seen her anywhere else, even with him.

He understood it, because he went somewhere like that when he played. That was what scared him.

In April 1979 she got a fellowship at a studio in New York. She sat on the edge of his bed with her red scarf already around her neck and told him she was done, that it wasn't him, that she couldn't be two people at once and the painter was the one she had to keep. She was kind about it. That made it worse. There was nothing to fight.

He wrote a song that night. It was the last thing he wrote sober for a long time.

Arrow of Time



3:13

Listen on Bandcamp

Arrow of Time
Hit me right through the heart
When you said you were done
it tore my body apart
The heavens have opened
and pain fills this guy
and you know I see your face
every time I close my eyes.

Never ever thought I would lose your love
Everywhere I look it's shades of gray
I'd do anything to turn around
The arrow of time my way

Day after day
I walk through the haze
All my friends keep on saying
It's only a phase
A phase that I'm going through
But it's a Calvary climb
I'm just a hologram
Hanging round and killing time

Never ever thought I would lose your love
Everywhere I look it's shades of gray
I'd do anything to turn around
The arrow of time my way

⁂

The phase lasted two years.

Leo joined a bar band called the Mystic Valley Rollers that played Union Square in Somerville on Friday nights and anywhere that would pay them on Saturdays. He discovered that he was a better guitarist with three drinks in him, a worse one with six, and that he didn't care about the difference after nine. Somebody always had something stronger in a folded-up dollar bill in the men's room. He was late to work, then later, then not at all on Mondays.

At Thanksgiving in 1979 he showed up at Clifton Street two hours late, with the Martin slung over his shoulder and a smell of beer that came into the house a step ahead of him. His mother kissed him anyway and said the turkey had waited, and so had Pop.

Pop was ninety-one now, and the guitar was his favorite thing about his grandson. As soon as the pie was on the table he banged his fork against his water glass and said, "Play something, little king." So Leo played. He played too loud and too fast, a song of his own about

Carla that he had written at two in the morning, and halfway through the second verse he lost the words entirely and sat there with his hand flat on the strings, laughing at nothing.

Pop clapped anyway. Frank got up from the table without a word and went down the cellar stairs.

After a minute Helen put down her napkin and followed him. Leo sat in the dining room with the guitar on his knee and Pop dozing in his chair, and for the first time in his life he heard his parents argue. Their voices came up through the floorboards, low and fierce, too soft to make out, except for one sentence of his mother's, very clear: "He's yours, Frank. Talk to him."

And his father's answer, after a long time: "And tell him what?"

Leo let himself out the back door before they came up.

His mother kept calling every Sunday, the way she always had, and he lied to her cheerfully. Work was great. He was eating fine. The band was getting real gigs now. One Sunday in January, after he had finished a long, bright story about a club in Cambridge that wanted them back, there was a silence on the line so long he thought she had hung up.

"I've heard that voice before, Leo," she said quietly.

He asked her what she meant. She wouldn't say. She told him to wear a hat, it was cold, and that she loved him, and she hung up, and he sat there holding the dead receiver and wondering, without wanting to, whose voice she had heard it in.

In April 1980, walking off a hangover on a Saturday morning, he turned down Newbury Street for no reason at all and stopped dead in front of a gallery window.

It was his kitchen window. His Somerville kitchen window in snow light, with the radiator underneath it and the edge of his own coffee cup on the sill. Carla had painted it during the blizzard, on the fourth day, while he sat on the floor playing her something. Now it hung in a gilded frame on Newbury Street beside a small white card with her name, the year, and the title, *Somerville, Snowed In*, and under that, a little round red sticker.

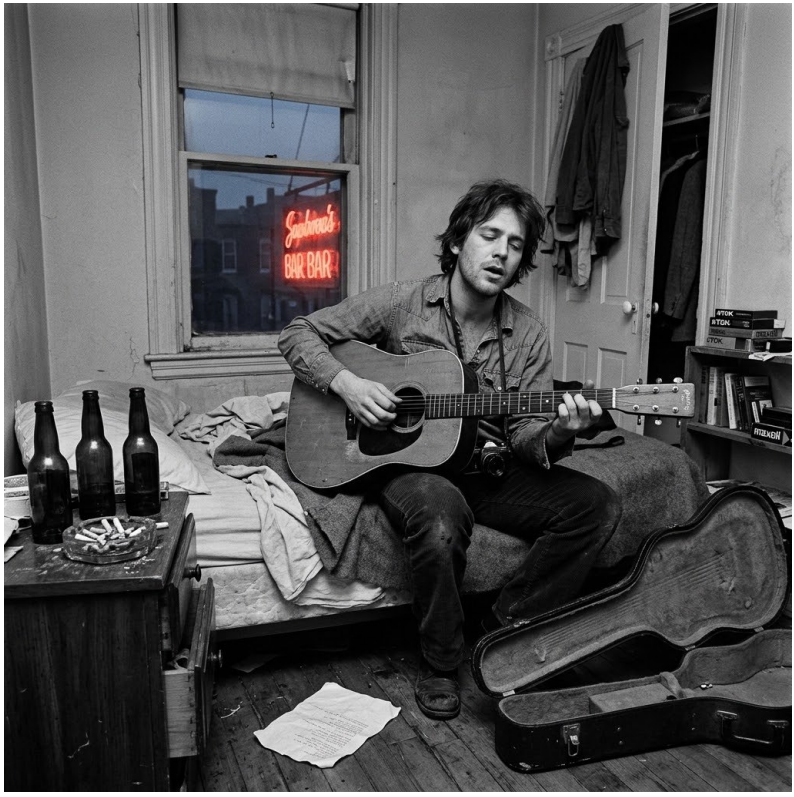
Somebody had bought it. Some stranger was going to hang that week of his life over a couch in Back Bay and never know there had been a man on the floor just out of the frame, playing her a song.

He stood there until a woman came out of the gallery and asked if he was interested in the piece. He said he had been, once. Then he went looking for the nearest open bar, which at ten in the morning on Newbury Street took some finding. He found it.

His father didn't call. But in the fall of 1980, almost a year after Thanksgiving, Frank Marsh drove to Somerville on a Saturday morning, knocked on Leo's door, looked at him for a long minute, and said, "You look like the guys who didn't come back." Then he drove home. It was, Leo understood much later, his answer to his mother's question. It had taken him a year to find it.

That week Leo wrote a song on a cocktail napkin at the bar in Union Square, while the radio over the register played "Song of the Kite" by a Boston band called Private Lightning, the violin soaring over the guitars. The Rollers played his song twice that Friday. Nobody in the band noticed it was about him.

Fall Apart Blues



4:00

Listen on Bandcamp

If I try,
I can get my ass in gear
and make a list
Of all of the things
that I should never have done
in my life.
Hindsight is a bitch
when she pulls the bait and switch.
It leaves you in a coma
on the floor.

I've got to get back in the game
I'm hoping that luck fine tunes her aim
But I know, yes I know
I've got those fall apart blues
I've got those filthy blues again

She never asks me
where I've been all night.

My Guitar,
she never asks me
where I've been all night
Whenever I slide my hand
around her neck
she always complies
Major chords are fine
when the game is on the line
A minor 7th
doesn't blow her mind

I've got to get back in the game
I'm hoping that luck fine tunes her aim
But I know, yes I know
I've got those fall apart blues
I've got those filthy blues again

When I die,
there'll be broken hearted girls
who start to cry.
There are those
who will close their eyes
and heave a sigh of relief.
Karma is a witch
and she'll throw me in the ditch.
They'll say some words
and then it's time to eat.

I've ... got to get back in the game
I'm hoping that luck fine tunes her aim
But I know, yes I know
I've got those fall apart blues.
I've got those filthy blues again.

⁂

The voice that talked him into things was never a stranger's voice. That was the trick of it. It sounded exactly like his own, only warmer, only more reasonable. *One more. You earned it. You played great tonight. Carla's probably out right now. Everybody else is having fun. You can drive. You always drive.*

On the last night of it, the Rollers played a wedding in Lexington. Afterward, loading the van in the parking lot, Dewey the drummer held out his hand for Leo's keys and said he could sleep on Dewey's couch, it was no trouble. Leo laughed and told him he was fine. He was always fine.

On a Sunday in February 1981, at two in the morning, on Route 128 near the Lexington exit, he drove.

He remembered the voice and then he remembered nothing. When he came to, he was in a hospital bed in Burlington with forty stitches running from his left eyebrow into his hairline and a state trooper waiting in the hall. The car was wrapped around a guardrail. Nobody else had been on the road. The trooper told him, without any

particular kindness, that this was the only lucky thing that had happened to him in a long time and that he should consider spending it wisely.

The doctor who had sewn him up came back at four in the morning. He was a resident, not much older than Leo, tall and thin and soft-spoken, and he had been on his feet for thirty hours. His name tag said ANAND. He pulled a chair up to the bed instead of standing over it, which nobody else had done.

"I did the stitches small," he said. "The scar will fade more than you think." He looked at Leo for a while. "The trooper told you that you were lucky."

Leo said yes.

"I don't believe in luck," the doctor said. "Or in somebody up there looking out for you. I have seen too many nights like this one go the other way." He said it gently, the way you might tell someone the time. "Nothing saved you tonight. It was an accident that you lived, the same as it was an accident that you crashed. What you do with an accident is the only part that belongs to you."

He stood, put a hand on Leo's shoulder for a moment, and went back to work. Leo never learned his first name. But long after he had forgotten the trooper's face, he remembered that hand on his shoulder.

His mother came at dawn, still in her coat over her nightgown, and sat holding his hand without a word for an hour. His father stood at the window the whole time with his back to the room, looking out at the parking lot. When they left, Frank stopped in the doorway and studied the row of stitches for a long moment.

"Who did those?" he asked.

"A resident," Leo said.

Frank nodded. "He did good work."

The swelling went down. The scar stayed. For the rest of his life, Leo would see it every morning in the mirror, a pale line like a signature.

Lying in that bed with nothing to do but stare at the ceiling, he wrote the voice down. He gave it a face, the way you would a person, because it was easier to hate that way.

Clarity



3:10

Listen on Bandcamp

The devil's got a way of getting his work done
For every little thing he needs,
he's got a master plan
He'll clap you on the back
He'll whisper in your ear
He'll tell you every thing you need to hear.

He'll walk you down to the ancient well
And beckon you to drink
Your throat is parched and your lips are dry.
You act before you think.

He'll clap you on the back
He'll whisper in your ear
He'll tell you every thing you need to hear.

He'll tell you what you need to hear.

And when the lights go out
You struggle in the dark
The beast is gone
but the scar reveals his mark.

The devil's got a way of getting his work done
For every little thing he needs,
he's got a master plan

He'll clap you on the back
He'll whisper in your ear
He'll tell you every thing you need to hear.

⁂

He lost his license for a year and a half and his job for good. He went to his first meeting in the basement of a Methodist church in Medford because the judge told him to, and to his second because the coffee was free, and to his third because a retired bricklayer named Sully looked at the scar and said, "Mine's on the inside, kid. You got lucky. People can see yours."

That summer, he moved back into his old room on Clifton Street. It was the most humiliating thing he had ever done, and his father never once mentioned it. Instead, on the first Saturday, Frank walked Leo out to the garage and pulled a tarp off a 1966 Mustang convertible with no engine, three flat tires, and a family of mice in the back seat.

He'd bought it for eighty dollars from a widow on Lowell Street in Peabody.

"Needs work," Frank said. That was all.

They rebuilt it together over fourteen months, mostly in silence, which was the only language either of them spoke fluently. Somewhere around the carburetor, Frank started telling stories about the war. Not the bad ones, not yet. The funny ones. A cow in a church in Belgium. A sergeant from Texas who had never seen snow. Leo understood that he was being trusted with something, and he got better at keeping his hands steady.

The one Leo liked best was the cow.

"November of '44," Frank said, lying on his back on the creeper under the front axle, so that the story came out from beneath the car. "Little town in Belgium. We slept in the church because it was the only building with three walls. In the morning there's a cow standing in the middle aisle. Brown cow. Just standing there facing the altar like she'd come early to get a good seat."

Nobody in the platoon knew what to do with a cow except the sergeant from Texas, a long, skinny farm boy from Amarillo named Tully, who had never seen snow but had seen plenty of cows. Tully took off his helmet, knelt down in the aisle, and milked her into it.

"We hadn't had fresh milk since England," Frank said. "We had those D-ration chocolate bars, the ones so hard you had to shave them with a bayonet. Tully heated the milk on a Coleman stove right there in the nave and we shaved the chocolate in. Hot cocoa. In a church. In a war." He was quiet for a second under the car. "Best thing I ever tasted in my life. Don't tell your mother."

The chaplain came through that Sunday and said Mass in the same church, and the cow stood through the whole thing, which Frank said was more than you could say for half the platoon. When the platoon moved out, she followed them. For three days she followed them, down the road in a column of trucks and jeeps, and every morning Tully milked her into his helmet, and the lieutenant pretended not to see it.

On the fourth day, a Belgian farmer came running up the road in wooden shoes, shouting and waving his arms. The lieutenant, who had been a lawyer in Pittsburgh, sat down on the hood of a jeep and wrote out a receipt on official Army paper, very formal: *Received from the bearer, one (1) cow, brown, for temporary service with the United States Army. Returned in good condition. Milk expended in the line of duty.* Then he needed a witness to sign it, and Tully, grinning, wrote down the name of the man standing next to him.

"Me," Frank said.

In the spring of 1949, a letter came to the house on Clifton Street from the Department of the Army. Helen opened it at the kitchen table. The Belgian government, on behalf of a farmer in the province of Liège, had filed a claim for the wartime requisition of one dairy cow, and Private Frank J. Marsh was listed as the responsible party. Would he please verify.

Frank rolled out from under the Mustang. He was laughing. Leo had never heard him laugh like that, a real laugh, helpless, all the way down, and he had to sit up on the creeper and wipe his eyes with the back of his wrist.

"Your mother thought I was going to jail," he said. "Over a cow."

"Did you verify it?"

"Sure I verified it. They paid him forty dollars." Frank lay back down and rolled under the car again. From underneath it, after a while, he said, "Best forty dollars the Army ever spent."

It was in February 1982, in the coldest week of the winter, that Frank told him the other kind.

They were in the garage after supper with a kerosene heater ticking between them, trying to fit new rings on the pistons, and Frank's hands were a little unsteady from the cold. He set the piston down on the workbench very carefully, the way he did everything, and wiped his fingers on a rag for a long time.

"The sergeant from Texas," he said. "Tully. The one with the cow."

Leo waited.

"We were in the Ardennes that Christmas. Belgium. It snowed every day. Tully thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever

seen. He made a snow angel in a field outside a town I still can't pronounce, laughing like a kid, and the rest of us yelled at him to get down, get down, and he said they can't see us in all this white." Frank folded the rag in half, and then in half again. "They could see us."

He didn't say anything more about Tully. He didn't need to. After a while he said, "I came home in '45 and I drank for a year. Your mother never told you that. One morning she poured out every bottle in this house and told me I could have her or I could have that, and I couldn't have both." He picked the piston back up. "Everybody comes home from something, Leo. You came home from yours. That's all."

It was the longest speech Leo ever heard his father make. Neither of them mentioned it again. But the next week, at the meeting in Medford, when it was Leo's turn, he talked for the first time about what he was really afraid of, and Sully, in the back row, nodded as if he'd been waiting a long time to hear it.

The day his license came back, in September 1982, the Mustang turned over on the first try.

He drove it up the coast that afternoon with the top down, and by the time he got to Gloucester he had the song.

Flame of Addiction



3:53

Listen on Bandcamp

The ghosts from my past
Keep on vexing me.
Sweet siren clarion calls.
Dimly lit alleyways
where I wandered lost
Chasing the shadows alone
My heart a furnace stoked by vices
Burning brighter
with each forbidden sip.
It was a reckless dance with fate.
A desperate grip had hold of me.
Chasing shadows, dancing with my demons
The flame of addiction,
It consumed my battered soul.

But then I glimpsed a different fire,
Not in the bottom of a glass
or rolled-up bills.
A gleaming sleek machine,
A promise of thrills.
My key held the wild beast in check.

Like an open vein,
the road stretches out
into a distant shimmer.
Shifting through the gears,
Pure joy.

The dashboard became my confessional,
Where my past sins were laid bare,
Leaving shadows behind
As I made amends
I'm free with the wind in my hair

The flame of addiction extinguished,
In the rearview old memories dissolve.
Now I slice through the fog
I'm Free, at Last.
Brand new, again.

Just the purr of the engine
sets my racing mind at ease
(my mind, at ease).
Cruising down the road...
all my insanity
cleansed from my brain.

⁂

He got a job at a small company in Woburn that made infusion pumps, the kind that drip medicine into hospital patients a few drops at a time. It paid less than his old job and he loved it more. He drove the Mustang to work with the top down until November, and on weekends he drove it nowhere in particular: up Route 1 to Newburyport, out to Gloucester to watch the boats come in, once all the way to the top of Mount Washington and back in a single day just to see if he could.

In Newburyport, the week before Christmas 1983, he wandered into a shop full of brass instruments and ship clocks and bought a kaleidoscope. He didn't know why. It was a long brass tube with a wheel of colored glass at the end, and when he held it up to the window the whole gray harbor broke into jewels. He needed a gift for the Yankee swap at his friend Marty's Christmas party, and he told himself that was why. He wrapped it in tissue paper, then in a shoebox, then in a bigger box, then in silver paper, because he liked the idea of someone having to work for it.

At Marty's party there were thirty wrapped gifts under the tree and one woman he didn't know, standing in front of them with her hands on her hips, taking the whole thing far more seriously than

anyone else in the room. When her number was called, she didn't grab the biggest box or the prettiest one. She walked straight to his.

She got through the silver paper, the big box, the shoebox, and the tissue, laughing harder at each layer, and the whole party laughed with her. Then she held the brass tube up to the Christmas tree, turned the wheel, and went completely quiet.

"Who brought this?" she said, without lowering it.

Leo raised his hand. She still didn't lower it. She turned, slowly, until the kaleidoscope was pointed right at him, and said, "Huh. You look better like this."

It was the worst line anyone had ever said to him, and he laughed so hard he had to sit down.

Years later, Leo wrote a song about that night from the point of view of his gift, a box sitting under the tree with twenty-nine others, hoping the right person would choose it. She would call it the most romantic thing anyone had ever written about a Yankee swap.

Open Me



4:04

Listen on Bandcamp

As you look at all of us
just waiting here,
Why don't you open me?
Why don't you open me?

I won't manipulate,
decisions are your own.
Why don't you open me?
Why don't you open me?

A dream, a wish, a hope
I'm waiting here again
Unwrap the smoky veil
And see what lies within.

I'm really trying
not to play with your heart.
Why don't you open me?
Why don't you open me?

There is a secret story
waiting to be told.
A truth concealed and guarded
waiting to unfold.

Take a hold of me,
let me feel complete
Ignite my life for real,
revive my stalled heartbeat.

Say there's something here,
unwrap the mystery
Illuminate the night,
put your faith in me.

So tear away the layers,
find the man within
I want to know what's in your heart,
so our story can begin

My heart is locked,
You are the one that holds the key.
Now you can open me.
Now you can open me.
Now you can open me.



Her name was Jenny Kowalski. She was a children's librarian in Melrose who read four books a week, could not parallel park, and said exactly what she thought a half second before she decided whether she should. She asked him about the scar on their second date, in a back booth at a diner in Melrose, and he told her everything, the whole two years, and she listened without flinching. When he was done, she said, "Okay. Do you want the rest of my fries?"

By June they had a routine of no routine at all. On Sunday mornings Leo would pull up in front of her apartment in the Mustang with the top down, and she would come out with an old plaid blanket and a wicker picnic basket, and they would drive north until one of them said stop.

On the last Sunday of June 1984, she said stop at a grassy point on Cape Ann where there was nothing in front of them but a lighthouse on the rocks and the whole Atlantic. They spread the blanket and ate the sandwiches and lay back in the sun. Somewhere in there she said something. He could never afterward remember what it was, only that it was so dry and so absurd that he laughed until his ribs hurt, and she looked over at him with the little sideways glance she gave him whenever she had scored a point.

That was when it happened. He would try to explain it to Marty years later and never get it right. It was as if gravity had been canceled for him and nobody else. The weight that had been holding him down since the guardrail on Route 128 let go all at once, and he had the distinct, ridiculous feeling that if he stood up too fast he would drift right off the blanket and out over the water.

He didn't tell her he loved her that day. He was an engineer, and he wanted to check his figures first. He told her the next Sunday, on the same blanket, on the same rock, and she said, "I know. I was waiting for you to finish the math."

He wrote the song that night. He didn't play it for her until their wedding.

Float Me Up



3:25

Listen on Bandcamp

The sky is as blue as it gets
The breeze pushes fragrance my way
The force that was holding me down
Has just vanished and skittered away
Like a cloud that dissolves while you watch

You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me

A comical phrase and a glance
Has submerged my brain in a trance
I can't get control of my mind
Synapses are getting entwined
Sparking arcs are igniting inside

You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me
You float me up, you float me

Random thoughts chase each other in vain
Jumping tracks like a runaway train
The circuits connect and then choke
Electrons are sending up smoke
Like a ghost that continues to haunt.

⁂

They were married on June 8, 1985, at St. Joseph's in Medford. Frank Marsh, in his only suit, shook his son's hand on the church steps and then, to everyone's astonishment including his own, hugged him. Then Leo drove his bride away from the church in the Mustang with the top down, all of four blocks, to the Knights of Columbus hall around the corner, where the Rollers played until midnight and the two of them danced every slow song on a scuffed hardwood floor that had already seen forty years of weddings.

Pop had died the winter before, at ninety-six. In his will he left Leo the Philco radio and the Sears telescope, which Leo had never actually taken when he moved out. There was a note taped to the tripod in Pop's shaky capitals: FOR THE LITTLE KING. KEEP LOOKING UP.

PART THREE

The Middle of the Ocean

1987–2011

Jenny wrote it in her diary on a Sunday morning in the spring of 1987, though Leo wouldn't know that for thirty-four years. What he knew was that she came out of the bathroom holding a little plastic stick, sat down on the edge of the tub, and said, "Well. I guess we're three now."

William Francis Marsh was born that December, eight pounds even, furious about all of it. Leo had never been so afraid of anything that weighed so little.

He dealt with fear the way he'd always dealt with it when he was sober: he built something. Over three sleepless weeks at the kitchen table, he and Jenny made a robot for the crib. Jenny cut the body out of soft gray corduroy and stuffed it with cotton batting, with stubby padded arms, a square head, and a felt antenna that flopped over to one side. Leo built the eyes: two little green LEDs set behind a layer of soft cloth, run off a battery pack he sealed inside a zippered pocket in the robot's back, where no small hands could ever get at it. When the room went dark, the eyes glowed softly through the fabric. Jenny named it Henry, after nobody, because it looked like a Henry. Billy would not sleep without Henry until he was nine.

At three in the morning, walking the floor with the baby on his shoulder, Leo made up songs. Most of them were nonsense. One of them was about everything he wanted for his son and everything he was afraid of, all mixed up together the way it is at three in the morning. Jenny, half asleep on the couch, kept answering it with a jump-rope rhyme her grandmother used to sing in Chicopee, a strange little couplet she said had always scared her, and that she couldn't stop singing anyway.

Shine, Shine



3:26

Listen on Bandcamp

I see the future, in all its glory
My droid has green eyes, his name is Henry
If I had a buffalo Nickel for every time
My dreams collided with stark reality
I'd buy a super yacht and sail it
Around the seven seas then right back home.
I'd take a breath and try to calculate my fate.
And hope I don't end up like Sharon Tate

Shine when others tell you
that the world we know
is a ball of confusion
Shine

Maybe I will ponder, calculate and scheme
I'll find a way to capture joy
synthesize it in a jar
and maybe I'll get Henry to do all the work.
In case of failure or despair
Take a generous spoonful from my jar

And keep on dancing
with great abandon
Don't let them see you
Just keep on tapping

(Momma's little baby will never cry
Momma's little baby would rather die)

Just keep on shining
There's a silver lining

⁂

The years after that went by the way years do in the middle of a life: in a blur of permission slips, oil changes, and other people's birthday parties. They bought a Victorian in Melrose that needed more work than the Mustang had. Jenny ran a book club that met Tuesdays at seven and argued about endings. Billy played shortstop badly and catcher well. Leo coached his Little League team for six seasons and lost almost every game.

In 1996, the little company in Woburn was bought by Ashcombe Medical Systems, a medical-device giant with a glass tower on Atlantic Avenue. Leo's department moved into the tower, and Leo started taking the commuter rail from Melrose Highlands to North Station every morning. His new boss was a man named Dale Pruitt, who had an MBA, a closet full of identical blue shirts, and a single man-

agement philosophy he called Push and Drive. He said it so often that the engineers began saying it to each other in the elevator, and then stopped finding it funny.

The only good thing about the glass tower was Tom Reardon. He had the desk across from Leo's, a big, rumpled electrical engineer from Southie who could fix anything with a soldering iron and a paper clip, and who answered every Push and Drive memo by taping it to the inside of the men's room door. He had come to Ashcombe from the Navy. He went to Mass every Sunday and to Fenway every other Saturday. He was the first person at work Leo told about the scar and the meetings. Tom just nodded, said his own father had been a drinker, and that was the end of it. From then on, when the engineers went out after work, Tom ordered two ginger ales instead of a beer.

Tom had a daughter named Callie, a skinny six-year-old with a gap in her teeth, and he called her Buttercup. Tom swore he'd made it up. She loved it. Billy, who was thirteen and too old for most things, let Callie follow him around at the Reardons' Fourth of July cookouts and pretended to mind.

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, Tom had an early flight from Logan to Los Angeles for a trade show. His wife, Eileen, was a nurse at the VA hospital in Jamaica Plain, finishing a night shift, so Leo picked Tom up at six in Charlestown. Callie came along in her pajamas because she insisted. The oldies station was on, low. Halfway down Rutherford Avenue an old song from the sixties came on, the one with Buttercup in the title, and Tom reached over and turned it all the way up without asking. He sang it to the back seat at the top of his lungs, badly, with both arms, all the way through the Sumner Tunnel, and Callie shrieked at him to stop and laughed so hard she got the hiccups. Leo had heard Tom sing at three Fourth of July cookouts and had never once heard him hit a note. He didn't hit one that morning either. For the rest of his life, whenever that song came on the radio, Leo changed the station. It was a perfect morning, cool and clear, the sky that hard, high blue New England only gets in September. In those days you could walk your people right to the gate. Tom hugged his daughter, then hugged her again, and said, "See

you Friday, Buttercup." She stood at the window with her hand pressed flat against the glass until the plane pushed back.

Leo dropped Callie at school and drove to Atlantic Avenue. He was at his desk, looking at the empty chair across from him, when someone down the hall turned on the television in the break room.

The Wave



3:06

Listen on Bandcamp

Here comes another day
You do the best you can
To keep it moving forward
And to lend a helping hand
'cause that's the ticket in.
And when the practice game is over
Then the real game begins.

He called her Buttercup,
She giggled at the name
He hugged her one more time
And then he turned to board the plane.
He disappeared into the sky.
And you know what I mean.

With the power of a wave
as it crashes on the shore,
I feel your pain, cutting me
Turning me around.

Inside an empty hole
Too dark to hold emotion
A little girl will live alone
and cling to her devotion
For the man who went away.

⁂

There was nothing to bury. There was a memorial Mass at St. Brigid's in South Boston, with people standing in the aisles and out onto the steps. Callie sat in the front row in a yellow dress, because yellow was her father's favorite color, holding a photograph of him in his Navy whites. Leo was supposed to read. He got through the first sentence.

It took Leo almost a year to write the song about that morning. When he finally did, he ended it with Tom's old song from the car, slowed down, and let it fade.

Afterward, at the Reardons' house, Eileen took his hand and thanked him for driving Tom to the airport. She meant it kindly. He went home and lay awake doing the arithmetic he would do for years. If he had hit one more red light. If he had told Tom to take a cab. If he had said the car wouldn't start.

The mortgage on the Victorian still had years to run. Jenny's library hours got cut. Leo couldn't quit, so he went back to the glass tower and sat across from an empty desk that nobody at Ashcombe

had the courage to clear. Dale Pruitt sent an email about resilience and productivity.

Tom had promised Callie he would teach her to ride a two-wheeler that fall. In October her bike was still standing in the Reardons' front hall, purple with white streamers, the training wheels already off and sitting in a coffee can by the door. One Saturday, Leo drove to Charlestown without calling first and asked Eileen if he could borrow her daughter for an hour.

He ran beside Callie up and down the sidewalk with one hand on the back of the seat, telling her to look up, look up, not at the front wheel, at where you want to go. On the ninth or tenth try he let go. She didn't notice. She rode half the length of the block by herself before she looked back and saw him standing there with his hands empty, and she shrieked with joy and made him watch her do it eleven more times.

Afterward he drove home and sat in his own driveway in Melrose for an hour with the engine off. Jenny saw the car from the kitchen window and didn't go out. She knew he would come in when he could.

In November, somebody from facilities finally cleared Tom's desk and left a cardboard box on Leo's chair with a yellow sticky note: *For the family?* Leo was supposed to drive it to Charlestown. Instead he opened it in the Ashcombe parking garage, sitting in his car with the dome light on.

There was a coffee mug, a Red Sox schedule, a framed photo of Callie on a pony. Under them, held together with a rubber band, was a stack of paper two inches thick: every Push and Drive memo Dale Pruitt had sent out in five years, each one carefully peeled off the inside of the men's room door, with the tape still on the corners. At the very bottom of the box sat a single unopened can of ginger ale.

Leo laughed out loud, alone in the garage, a big helpless laugh that bounced off the concrete. Then he couldn't stop crying, and he sat there until a security guard tapped on the window to ask if he was all right.

That was the fall he stopped going to meetings. It didn't happen all at once. He was tired one Tuesday and late the next, and the week after that it was raining. Sully called twice. The first time, Leo let it ring. The second time he picked up and said he was fine, just busy, and Sully was quiet for a moment and then said, "Okay, kid. You know where I am." Jenny noticed the Tuesdays. She didn't say anything. She was waiting to see if he would.

In December 2001, after twenty years sober, Leo poured himself a scotch from the crystal decanter they kept for company at Christmas. Nothing terrible happened. So the next night he did it again.

That Christmas he gave Jenny a diamond ring she hadn't asked for and didn't need, a second ring to wear beside her wedding band. It was the kind of present a man buys when he can't say what he's sorry for.

On the train home, he started having a dream. He'd had it before, as a kid. In 1960, he and Pop had watched an episode of *The Twilight Zone* about a worn-out commuter who falls asleep on the train and wakes up at a sunny little town called Willoughby, where it's always summer and nobody is ever in a hurry. Leo had loved it. He'd forgotten how it ended.

One night in January, after the house was asleep and the scotch in the decanter had gone down a few inches since supper, he took his old guitar down to the cellar and turned the dream into a song. He put everything in it: the train, the snow, Dale Pruitt and his push and drive, the decanter calling from across the room, and Jenny. It came out in one sitting. He never played it for anyone.

Last Stop Willoughby



3:08

Listen on Bandcamp

After a night of panic
and a tossed up bed
The alarm clock starts
a fruitless commute to the office
I throw down a coffee
to start me up.

And when I get to my cubicle
of course a little late,
my boss is there
to present his theory
of push and drive.
Push and drive will save the day.

Sometimes I think
I will lose my mind
Just Kill Me Now Please

Coming home on the evening train
The snow is falling down
and I drift to sleep
When the train slows down
I'm jarred awake
The PA says we're in Willoughby

The sweet smell
of warm summer air flows in
A band is playing

The doppler bells
and the station stop
invade my brief relief
and they bring me back
to the tragic facts
of our modern lives
when all that remains
is to push and drive.

Arriving home at my domicile
I drag myself inside
Then the tie comes off.
The decanter calls
from across the room.
destroys my insides
but it numbs the pain.

Sometimes I think
I will lose my mind
Just Kill Me Now Please

When I try to reason
with an angry spouse
and her diamond ring
She's grown accustomed
to the lifestyle.
Anything less is a fait accompli.

Another soul sucking day and now
I'm on the evening train
When the sandman strikes
And relieves
my shriveled confidence.
I'll live my life in Willoughby

The sweet smell
of warm summer air flows in
A band is playing

⁂

Years later, Leo would be ashamed of that verse about Jenny. She was angry, all right, but not about any lifestyle. She was angry because she could smell it on him, and because she had married a man who'd told her the whole truth on their second date, and now he was lying to her across the kitchen table. The diamond ring had been an apology. She didn't want it. She wanted him.

One night in March 2002, Pop's old Philco was playing in the kitchen, and Channel 38 was running old *Twilight Zone* reruns after the late news. The one that came on was that same episode. Leo sat down and watched it to the end for the first time in forty years. He remembered, then, how it ended: the man steps off the train into his beautiful summer town, and in the real world, they carry him away. Willoughby is the name of the funeral home.

Leo poured the decanter into the sink. In the morning he called Sully, who was eighty and still answered on the first ring. Jenny drove him to a meeting that night and waited in the parking lot with a library book until it was over. She did that for ninety nights.

⁂

Frank Marsh died in April 2003, at eighty-two, in the same house on Clifton Street where he'd carried his son out into the yard to watch Sputnik. Leo's mother had gone four years earlier. Cleaning out the house took a month of weekends.

On the last of them, Leo went down to the cellar and found the footlocker. Same stenciled name. Same mothballs. Same uniform, folded with the precision of a man who had never stopped being a soldier in that one small way. And under it, the book, with an envelope tucked inside the front cover. Upstairs in the den, on the wall above his father's chair, was something Leo had looked at a thousand times without seeing: a yellowed newspaper photograph, framed, of a tall man with an umbrella stepping off an airplane in 1938, smiling and holding up a sheet of paper that promised peace. His father had kept it on the wall for fifty years. It was the only picture in the room.

Leo sat in his father's chair with the book in his lap and the desk lamp on. The gold eagle caught the light.

The envelope was addressed in pencil, in his father's square machinist's hand, to Helen. It had no stamp and no postmark. Inside were two sheets of thin Army stationery, folded small and gone soft at the creases, as if they had been unfolded and read many times and put back.

> *May 2, 1945. Germany.*
>
> *Dear Helen,*
>
> *I am not going to send this. The censors would never pass it, and if they did, I would not want you to read it. But I have to put it somewhere, and you are the only place I have.*

Yesterday they put us in trucks and drove us to a camp outside a town called Dachau. They said every man should see it, so nobody could ever say it did not happen.

There was a train on a siding by the gate. Thirty or forty boxcars. I thought they were full of firewood. They were full of people. They had been dead a long time. Some of them had tried to climb out.

Inside, there were men still alive who weighed what a boy weighs. One of them took hold of my sleeve and would not let go, and I did not want him to. He kept saying something I could not understand. I gave him my chocolate bar, and a medic took it out of his hand and told me it would kill him. I did not know that. I did not know anything.

There was a building with a chimney. I am not going to write about the building.

It snowed last night. The first of May, and it snowed. I thought about Tully, the boy from Texas I wrote you about at Christmas. He had never seen snow until Belgium.

Tonight we are billeted in a house a mile up the road. It is a nice house. Lace curtains, a piano, a picture of their boy in his uniform on the piano. The woman who lives here keeps telling us she did not know. Wir haben es nicht gewusst. She says it to every one of us, over and over, like a prayer. Helen, you could smell it from her garden. You could see the smoke from her kitchen window. His book is on her nightstand.

I am taking the book. I don't know why. Maybe so that one person in this house has to stop pretending they never read it.

I don't know what kind of man I will be when I come home. I wanted you to know that before I get there. If I am quiet, it will not be because of you.

All my love,
Frank

Leo read it twice. Then he sat for a long time with the two thin sheets on his knee and the desk lamp shining through them.

Fifty-eight years. The silences at the supper table. The year of drinking his mother never talked about. The one picture on the wall. All of it had been in this envelope, under the uniform, inside the

book, which was exactly where his father had kept everything that mattered. He had never sent it, and he had never thrown it away.

At work that same month, he had been reading a different kind of document. Ashcombe's newest infusion pump, a design that went all the way back to the little company in Woburn, had a fault in its hardware. Under one rare combination of settings, a timing flaw in the motor-control board could let the pump keep running after it should have stopped and deliver a dose far larger than the one programmed. Leo had traced it himself, late one night, with a logic analyzer and a cold cup of coffee. It was on a board he had drawn twenty years before. There had been eleven reports from hospitals. Two patients had died. Each case had been logged as user error.

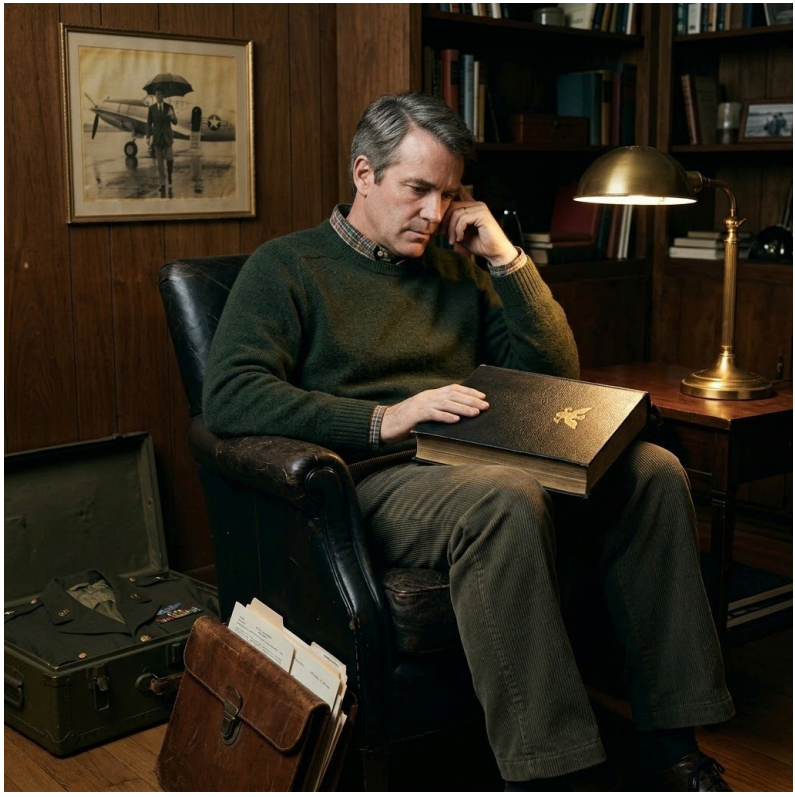
Dale Pruitt had called a meeting. The board, he explained, wanted to wait for more data. A recall would be catastrophic for the quarter. Engineering would patch around it quietly in the next software release, in about a year, and nobody outside the building would ever need to know the board was wrong. Everyone in the room nodded. Leo nodded too. He was forty-nine years old, with a mortgage and a son three years from college.

Now he sat in his father's chair and looked at the man with the umbrella. *They told everyone exactly what they were going to do. Wir haben es nicht gewusst.* The memo was right there in his briefcase. Everyone had read it. Nobody was going to do anything. And in a year, when the fix went out quietly, every one of them would be able to say they hadn't known.

That Sunday night he wrote a song about the man with the umbrella, and the family in the house outside Munich, and the men around the conference table, and found that it was all one song.

On Monday morning he called the FDA.

Lies and Consequences



4:16

Listen on Bandcamp

Cultures come and cultures go
The world still turns
It's a miracle that we're still here
When anybody anytime anywhere
Sets the world on fire
It winds up on a viral video
Insanity strikes and it hits us so quick
We give voice to the crazy, the fringe lunatic
And when the truth comes out
and the suppression begins
We've got to crank up the engine
and roll down that rocky hill again.

Desert fox and poison pills
The monkey swings
And his paramour earns her wings
The chambermaid makes up the bed
and plays for time
She prays that he will sleep in town tonight
There's a book on the nightstand
that the powers neglect
with a gold plated emblem
that the night lamps reflect
and when the truth comes out
and the suppression begins
We've got to crank up the engine
and roll down that rocky hill again.

⁂

The recall came in August. So did Leo's termination letter, which cited "performance concerns" for the first time in seven years of excellent reviews. Ashcombe's lawyers described him to a reporter from the *Globe* as a disgruntled employee with a history of alcohol abuse. That part, at least, was true, and it hurt the most.

For the first month, the phone rang all the time, and none of it was good news. A producer from a cable news show wanted him on at six

in the morning. A lawyer offered to represent him on contingency. A man he had worked beside for eleven years called from a pay phone, because he didn't want the call on his own phone records, to say he agreed with every word Leo had said and could never say so out loud. Then he hung up before Leo could answer.

That fall Leo sent out sixty-one résumés. He kept count in pencil on an index card taped inside the kitchen cabinet where they kept the coffee. Four companies called him back. None of them called a second time. At one interview in Waltham, a pleasant young man from human resources walked him to the elevator afterward and said, kindly, as if it were advice, "You know they all talk to each other, right?"

Jenny never once told him she had told him so, although she had, years before, about Ashcombe and about Dale Pruitt and about the glass tower in general. She picked up two extra Saturday story hours at the library and didn't mention why. She clipped the *Globe* article and put it in a drawer rather than in the trash, which he didn't understand until much later. On the nights he couldn't sleep, he would come downstairs at two in the morning and find her already at the kitchen table, reading, with a second cup of tea poured and waiting at his place.

On a Sunday evening in October, the phone rang and it was Eileen Reardon.

He hadn't talked to her in more than a year. After Tom died, Leo had been at the house in Charlestown every week, and then every month, and then, during the decanter winter, not at all, and he had been too ashamed since then to call. She didn't mention any of that. She said she had the *Globe* in her lap. She had read it three times.

"Tom used to come home and do impressions of that man," she said. "Pruitt. 'Push and drive, people. Push and drive.' Callie could do him too, when she was five. She'd stand on a kitchen chair." She was quiet for a moment. "Tom used to say you were the only one in that whole building who would ever actually do something about anything. He said it like a complaint, Leo. Like you were taking your sweet time about it."

Leo put his hand over his eyes and kept it there.

"I'm a nurse, Leo. I hang those pumps. Every night, I hang them, and I set them, and I walk away and trust them." She was quiet a moment. "Thank you."

"Anyway," Eileen said. "The paper said you had a drinking problem. I wanted to call and tell you I don't care, and Tom wouldn't have either. That's all." Then, in a different voice: "Hold on. Callie wants to ask you something."

There was a muffled conversation, and then an eight-year-old's voice, very businesslike. "Did you ever drink that ginger ale?"

"No," Leo said. "It's on the shelf in my den."

"Good," said Callie. "Don't." And she handed the phone back to her mother.

The government's investigation took two more years. But after that phone call, Leo found that he could wait.

When it did prove him right, in the summer of 2005, Dale Pruitt had already taken a better job in Minneapolis, Ashcombe had paid its fine and changed its logo, and Leo's name was poison in every medical-device company along Route 128. Nobody would hire him to design anything ever again.

So he went back to the bottom of the hill and started pushing. He took night classes, got his teaching license at fifty-two, and in September 2006 started teaching physics at Melrose High School. On the first day, he brought in his father's old K&E slide rule and passed it around the room. Not one of the students had ever seen one. A girl in the back row asked if it was a weapon. He said, in a way, yes.

⁂

The boy in the last seat of the third row slept through most of September.

His name was Danny Ferreira. He was sixteen, tall and narrow, with his hood up indoors and a Dunkin' Donuts visor folded in his back pocket. He worked the closing shift on Main Street four nights a week, and it showed. He turned in no homework. He failed the first quiz with a kind of serene indifference, as if it had been given to

somebody else. The guidance counselor told Leo not to waste his energy. The family had problems. The boy was headed for the door the day he turned eighteen.

Then, on the first Monday in October, the overhead projector died in the middle of Leo's lesson on vectors. Leo stood at the front of the room clicking the switch, feeling every one of his fifty-two years. Danny Ferreira lifted his head off the desk, sighed, walked to the front of the room without a word, flipped the machine on its side, wiggled something loose with a paper clip, and had it running again in under a minute. Then he went back to his seat and put his head back down. Twenty-eight teenagers applauded. Danny pulled his hood further over his face.

Leo asked him to stay after class.

"I fixed it," Danny said, before Leo could speak. "You're welcome."

"How did you know what was wrong with it?"

Danny shrugged. "The fan was running but the lamp wasn't. So it's the lamp or the thermal switch. Lamp looked fine. The switch sticks if somebody bumps the cart. Everybody bumps the cart."

Leo didn't say anything for a moment. Then he took a piece of chalk and wrote a problem on the board, a satellite in a circular orbit at five hundred and seventy-seven kilometers, and asked Danny how long it would take to go around the Earth once. It was a problem from the end of the semester. He expected the boy to leave.

Danny looked at it for a long time. Then he asked what the radius of the Earth was, and the mass, and what G was, and Leo told him. He borrowed Leo's calculator, and then, when Leo took it back, he borrowed the slide rule instead, because he'd seen it on the first day and wanted to try it. Twenty minutes later he said, "Like an hour and a half? Ninety-something minutes?"

"Ninety-six," said Leo. "That was Sputnik. October 1957. My father carried me out in the yard to see it go over. I was three."

Danny looked at the slide rule in his hands. "I'm not college material," he said. It came out flat and practiced, as if he'd heard it so many times that it had turned into a fact.

"Neither was I. I wanted to fly airplanes. My eyes washed me out." Leo took the slide rule back and laid it on the desk between them. "My grandfather told me something that I didn't understand for about twenty years. He said, 'Somebody's got to build the thing.'"

He heard his own voice say it, and for a moment, it wasn't his voice. It was Pop's, on the front porch on Clifton Street, with the brass telescope wobbling on its tripod and the whole sky open over Malden. Leo had to sit down on the corner of the desk.

Danny came back the next day after school, and the day after that. In June 2008, he graduated with a B-plus in physics and a co-op placement at Northeastern, the same program that had taken in a nearsighted kid from Malden thirty-six years before. On the last day of school, he left the slide rule on Leo's desk with a sticky note on it. Leo had loaned it to him in the spring. The note said: *Built the thing. Thanks, Mr. M.*

⁂

He was, it turned out, very good at it. He was happier than he'd been in twenty years.

⁂

Billy did not follow him into engineering, or into anything else his parents had imagined. He did get into Notre Dame, which made Leo prouder than he knew how to say, and he lasted one year in South Bend before he came home at Christmas and announced that he was marrying his high-school girlfriend, Nancy. He was nineteen. He did it over everyone's objections, and their daughter Rose was born in the summer of 2007, with Billy's dark eyes and Jenny's habit of saying exactly what she thought.

She was born at a minute to three in the morning on the twelfth of July, after nineteen hours, at the hospital in Melrose, ten minutes from the house. By four, Nancy was asleep, and Billy was asleep sitting up in the vinyl chair beside her with his mouth open, nineteen years old and suddenly somebody's father. Jenny had gone down the hall to

find coffee. A nurse came in, took one look at the two sleeping parents, and put the baby in Leo's arms instead.

He had forgotten how little they weighed. That was the first thing. She weighed about as much as a library book, and she was frowning at him with tremendous seriousness, as if he had kept her waiting.

He walked her to the window, the way he had walked the floor with her father twenty years before, at the same hour, in a house not far from here. Out past the parking lot there was a strip of sky over the Fells, going pale at the edges.

"There's a star I wanted to show you," he told her, very quietly. "But you can't see it tonight. This time of year it's behind the sun. Its name is Regulus. It means *little king*." She frowned harder. "I know. I've been the little king for fifty-three years. My grandfather gave me the job. I think it's time I passed it on."

She yawned at him, enormously, which he took as acceptance.

"It comes back in the spring," he said. "Every year. You can count on it. I'll show you."

When Jenny came back with two paper cups of coffee, she found him in the corner by the window, still talking. She stood in the doorway and listened for a while without letting him know she was there. Later she wrote it down, word for word as best she could remember it, on the back of a hospital menu, and kept it folded in her purse. Years afterward it turned up taped into the leather journal, and it was still there long after she could no longer remember who the baby was.

Billy called her Buttercup from the first day. Nobody had to ask why. Callie Reardon, twelve by then, came to the christening and held the baby. When she heard the name, she laughed, and then she had to go outside for a while.

Leo found her on the front steps of St. Joseph's, in the September sun, with her chin on her knees. He sat down beside her and didn't say anything, which was the one thing he had always been good at.

"It's stupid," Callie said after a while. "It's just a word."

"It isn't stupid."

"He used to say it was because I was the color of a buttercup when I was born. Jaundice. Mom said that wasn't even true, I was pink."

She wiped her nose on the back of her wrist. "He just made it up. He made everything up."

"He made up the best things," Leo said.

They sat there in the sun. Inside, someone was laughing, and somebody else was trying to get a group photograph organized. Across High Street, at the bus stop, an old man was sitting on the bench with a paper bag in his lap, feeding a crust of bread to the pigeons one crumb at a time. He was a strange sight for a warm afternoon: long silver hair to his shoulders, a white beard, a red flannel shirt buttoned to the throat, and heavy work boots. When he turned his head, the sun caught his glasses, and for an instant they flashed every color at once, like a prism in a window.

He was looking straight at them. He lifted one hand off the paper bag, not quite a wave, the way you greet somebody you know but haven't seen in a long time.

Then a city bus pulled up between them with a long hiss of air brakes. When it pulled away, the bench was empty, and the pigeons were walking around in circles looking for the rest of the bread.

"Who was that?" said Callie.

"No idea," said Leo, and he believed it. Then the door behind them opened, and Billy leaned out holding his daughter in her long white christening gown, and said they were waiting on the two of them for the picture, and could they please hurry up before Buttercup lost her patience. Callie laughed, wiped her face, and went in first.

In the spring of 2010, Jenny came home from a shelter on the North Shore with a puppy nobody had agreed to. He was some kind of Cavalier King Charles mix, chestnut and white, with long wavy ears, a white blaze down his forehead, a spray of freckles across his muzzle, and legs too long for a Cavalier, as if someone had slipped a springer spaniel into the family tree. He had brown eyes that looked straight into you and did not let go.

Billy and Nancy had come for Sunday dinner. Billy picked the puppy up, got his chin licked and his ear bitten, and said, "He's small, he's scrappy, and nobody told him he's not supposed to make the team. He's Rudy." Billy had watched the movie about the under-

sized walk-on at Notre Dame so many times as a boy that he'd worn out the tape. It was half the reason he'd gone to South Bend in the first place. Nobody argued.

Rudy turned out to be the most athletic dog anyone in Melrose had ever seen. He could snag a tennis ball off a bad bounce at full sprint. He cleared the backyard fence from a standstill exactly once, to Leo's horror, and never did it again, as if he'd only wanted to prove he could. And he had a way of dropping the ball at your feet and staring up at you, perfectly still, until you gave in. Jenny called it the Look. Nobody ever won against the Look.

The marriage didn't last. In the fall of 2011, Billy took a job at a sound studio in Los Angeles, and Nancy and Rosie stayed behind in Malden. Billy asked his father to drive him to Logan, and neither of them said anything about the last time Leo had driven someone there for a flight to Los Angeles. Rosie, who was four, came along in her pajamas. Billy hugged her, hugged her again, and said, "See you at Christmas, Buttercup." She stood at the window with her hand pressed flat against the glass, and Leo had to sit down.

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On the drive home, Rosie fell asleep in the back seat, and Leo found himself counting. Billy had been thirteen during the decanter winter. Thirteen was old enough to remember. Leo had never asked him what he remembered, and Billy had never said.

He looked in the rearview mirror at his granddaughter asleep with her mouth open, and decided that whatever had broken in the Marsh men, he was going to be the one who stayed.

⁂

The next morning, shaving, he noticed his face.

He hadn't meant to. A man looks in the mirror every day for fifty years and sees nothing but the patch of chin he's working on. But the light in the bathroom was different that morning, a low gray October

light, and Leo stopped with the razor halfway down his jaw and looked at the man in the glass.

The gray had come in at the temples while he wasn't paying attention, and then it had kept going. There were lines around his eyes he didn't remember agreeing to. Two deep ones ran down from the corners of his mouth, the same two his father had worn, so that for a second, in the steam, it was Frank Marsh looking back at him, rolling out from under the Mustang, laughing about a cow.

And the scar had faded. He had to lean close to find it, a pale thread from the left eyebrow up into the hairline, softer and narrower than it had been for thirty years. A young resident had told him at four in the morning that it would fade more than he thought, and he had been right. Leo had carried that line on his face through three jobs, a wedding, a son, a relapse, and a recall, and somewhere along the way it had stopped being the first thing anyone saw.

He finished shaving. He rinsed the razor and dried his face. Then he looked at the man in the mirror one more time, the man who had decided last night, on the drive home from Logan, to be the one who stayed.

"All right," he told him. "Let's go."

Downstairs, Jenny was at the kitchen table doing the crossword in pen. She looked up when he came in, and smiled the way she had smiled at him through a brass kaleidoscope at a Christmas party twenty-eight years before, and filled in the last word without looking down.

PART FOUR

The Mind Thief

2012–2021

The first thing Jenny forgot was the ending of a book.

It was the spring of 2012. Her book club had read the same novel she had chosen for them in 1994, and she didn't remember choosing it, or reading it, or how it ended. She laughed it off. Then she got lost driving home from the library in Melrose, a route she had driven four thousand times. Then she called Leo "Dad" at dinner and didn't notice.

The neurologist at Mass General was a young woman with a gentle voice who said the words *early onset* and then waited, the way Leo's father used to wait under the cellar bulb. Jenny was fifty-seven.

She took it the way she took everything, head-on. She bought a fat leather journal and began writing in it every day: who people were, what they meant to her, what had happened that morning. She taped photographs to the pages with clear packing tape: Billy at six in his catcher's gear, Rosie in a pumpkin costume, Leo in the Mustang on their wedding day. On the inside cover, in capital letters, she wrote: **YOUR NAME IS JENNY. YOU ARE LOVED. LEO IS YOUR HUSBAND. HE IS A GOOD MAN. LET HIM HELP.**

Leo retired from teaching that June to take care of her. In the evenings, after she was asleep, he read her journal, and it was the best and worst thing he had ever read.

On a good day that summer, she asked him to marry her again. "While I still know what it means," she said. She picked the date herself: September 10. Leo didn't understand at first. "The day before," she said. "The last day before everything went wrong. Tom was still alive. You were still you. I want to go back there, while I can still find it."

He wrote her a song for the day, about the journal and the thief who was stealing her a little at a time. He sang it to her under the maple, and she cried, and then she laughed and said it rhymed better than his vows the first time.

Final Remainder



3:40

Listen on Bandcamp

She writes the words in her journal,
fastens the photos
where they'll wait for her
A daily reminder of the love I hold for her.
To illuminate the darkness along the way.

Each Week, the Mind Thief
He creeps, She Weeps
Each Day he excavates
I wait, it escalates

He shows her no mercy.
She stays while she goes.

The 10th of September, we will be married
Again like the first time before
She will wear white
and our friends will wear flowers.
We'll dance round that same well worn floor.

Each Week, the Mind Thief
He creeps, She Weeps
Each Day he excavates
I wait, it escalates

⁂

They were married again in the backyard in Melrose, under the maple, in a light rain. Jenny wore white. Marty, now gray, read a poem. Rosie, five, threw flower petals at everyone, including the priest. Billy flew in from Los Angeles and stood beside his father, and when Jenny walked down the steps of the back porch on Leo's arm, Billy cried so hard he had to turn away.

When the rain came down harder, nobody went home. Billy, it turned out, had called the Knights of Columbus hall in Medford a month before. It hadn't changed: the same wood paneling, the same folding chairs, the same scuffed floor, a little more worn. What was left of the Rollers, gray now, played the same slow songs, and Leo and Jenny danced every one of them, around and around that floor, and for the length of every song she knew exactly where she was.

She knew all of them that day. She knew what it meant. Afterward, she wrote in her journal, in handwriting already starting to wander off the lines: *Married Leo again. Second time even better. Don't forget.*

She forgot. The Mind Thief took the journal first, then the photographs, then Billy's name, then her own. It took eighteen months. Through all of it, some part of her went on knowing Leo, if not who he was, then what he was: the person whose hand it was safe to hold.

⁂

The first time she didn't know him was a Tuesday in January.

It was nothing dramatic. He came in from shoveling the walk with snow in his hair, and she was standing in the front room in her robe, holding something up to the window. It was the brass kaleidoscope. It had lived on the bookshelf for twenty-nine years, between a dictionary and a jar of sea glass from Cape Ann, and he couldn't remember the last time either of them had picked it up.

She turned the wheel, and the gray January light broke into colors on her face. Then she heard him stamping his boots, and she turned, slowly, the way she had turned once in a living room full of wrapping paper, until the brass tube was pointed right at him.

He knew from the way she held herself that she didn't know who he was. She wasn't frightened. She was curious, the way she had always been curious about everything, a librarian looking at a book she hadn't read yet.

"Huh," she said. "You look better like this."

Leo stood in the doorway with the snow melting off his shoulders and did not trust himself to move. Then he crossed the room, and she lowered the kaleidoscope and looked at him without it, and something came back into her face, not all the way, but enough.

"There you are," she said, as if he were the one who had wandered off.

That night he put the kaleidoscope back on the shelf. A week later he took it down again and left it on the kitchen table, where she could find it.

⁂

In April, Callie Reardon started coming on Saturdays.

Nobody asked her to. She was seventeen, a senior at Charlestown High, with a driver's license four months old and her father's habit of showing up without calling first. She knocked on the back door at nine in the morning with a bag of bagels and said she figured

Mr. Marsh could probably use a couple of hours to go to the store or something, and she could sit with Mrs. Marsh, if that was all right.

It was more than all right. For most of a year, Leo had not been out of the house for longer than it took to walk Rudy around the pond. He went to the grocery store that first Saturday and stood in the cereal aisle for twenty minutes without picking anything up, because there was no one he had to hurry home to check on.

When he came back, Callie and Jenny were at the kitchen table doing a jigsaw puzzle of a lighthouse. Jenny didn't know who Callie was. It didn't matter. They were arguing, cheerfully, about where a piece of sky went, and Jenny was winning.

Callie came the next Saturday, and the one after that. When Leo finally tried to thank her, standing on the back porch in June, she shrugged and looked out at the yard.

"You taught me to ride a bike," she said. "Somebody had to."

⁂

The worst evenings were the ones when she wanted to go home.

It happened most often at dusk. She would put on her coat in the front hall, standing in the house she had lived in for twenty years, and ask him politely to take her home now, please, her mother would be worried. If he told her she was home, she cried. He tried it twice. He never tried it again.

So one night in October, he got the keys. He put the top up on the Mustang, because it was cold, and settled her in the passenger seat with a blanket over her knees, and they drove. Down Main Street, past the library, where her eyes followed the lit windows. Around Ell Pond, black and still. Up past the high school where he had taught, and the diner where she had once offered him the rest of her fries. She hummed along to the oldies station. She seemed perfectly happy. He drove until she began to get sleepy, and then he turned onto their street.

The porch light was on. Rudy's face was in the front window.

Jenny sat up a little. "Oh," she said, looking at the house. "This one's nice." She turned to him. "Do we live here?"

"We do," said Leo.

"Good," she said, and let him help her out of the car, and went in, and was home.

He did it a dozen more times that fall. Some nights they drove for ten minutes. Once they drove almost to Gloucester. It always ended the same way: the porch light, the dog in the window, and Jenny looking at the house she had lived in for twenty years and deciding that she liked it.

⁂

The last thing to go was her reading voice.

She lost names first, and then most nouns, and then most of the thread of a conversation, so that by the winter she spoke mostly in fragments, beautiful and strange, like someone translating from a language only she remembered. But Leo had brought home a stack of picture books from the children's room at the Melrose library, where the new children's librarian, whom Jenny had trained, put them aside for him every week. And when he put one in Jenny's lap and opened it to the first page, something happened.

She read it. Every word, in order, in the voice she had used for thirty years at story hour: unhurried, warm, a little dramatic on the good parts, pausing to turn the book around so that an audience that wasn't there could see the pictures. She read *Make Way for Ducklings* and *The Snowy Day* and *Goodnight Moon*. She read the same book three times in a row if he let her. When she came to the last page she closed the book gently and looked up, as if waiting for the children to clap.

Leo clapped. Rudy thumped his tail.

The words weren't coming from her memory, the neurologist said, when Leo told her about it. They were coming from somewhere older, the part of the brain that holds the things you have done so many times that you no longer have to remember how. Music lived there.

Prayers lived there. Apparently, for a children's librarian, so did *Goodnight Moon*.

She read to him almost every night that winter. He sat on the floor beside her chair with the dog across his feet, and he listened to his wife read him stories about ducklings and snow and a little rabbit saying good night to everything in the room, and it was, he would tell Rosie years later, one of the happiest times of his life. He didn't expect anyone to understand that. Rosie did.

⁂

Rudy never left her side. When she could no longer say Billy's name, she could still say his, and she would call it from the back porch at dusk even when he was already lying across her feet. He would thump his tail against the boards, every single time, as if she had just remembered him.

In March 2014, she went into hospice at a small house in Danvers with a garden outside her window, still frozen. The doctor who ran it was a tall, soft-spoken man in his sixties named Dr. Anand, who sat with the families as long as they needed and told the truth even when nobody had asked for it.

Leo had spent two years being handed sympathy by neurologists and social workers and insurance people, all of it soft-voiced and well practiced, and he had come to hate it a little. He watched the tall doctor cross the room with his gentle hands and his quiet voice, and braced himself for more of the same.

On the first afternoon, he shook Leo's hand and then didn't let go of it right away. He was looking at the pale line that ran from Leo's eyebrow into his hairline.

"Burlington," he said slowly. "February of 1981. The guardrail on 128."

Leo stared at him. Thirty-three years fell away, and a thin young resident was pulling a chair up to his bed at four in the morning.

"I did those small," Dr. Anand said, and almost smiled. "They faded more than you thought." Then he looked past Leo at Jenny,

asleep in the bed by the window, and the smile went away and he was all doctor again. "Tell me about her," he said. He sat down, and he listened for an hour.

He was the kind of doctor who wore his compassion on his sleeve, the way other doctors wore their stethoscopes. On the third night, the hospice chaplain asked whether the family would like to pray. Dr. Anand said quietly, so only Leo could hear, that he himself didn't believe in any of it, but that he believed in this, and he nodded at Leo's hand on Jenny's.

Leo stayed through the nights. The room smelled of the flowers people kept sending. Jenny's breathing stopped and started again, stopped and started again, and every time it stopped, Leo's did too.

The hospice let Rudy come. He lay along the length of Jenny's legs on the bed and would not move, not for food, not for the tennis ball Leo held out to him, and the nurses learned to work around him.

On the last night, Leo sat beside her with a legal pad on his knee and wrote down everything he still needed to say to her. When he read it back, it had turned into a song.

Doctor in the House



3:41

Listen on Bandcamp

If there are words
You've never said before
Tell them to me,
And I'll tell you.
Precious time is running out
While I'm Watching.
As I'm watching.
Before you go.

It's been a while since we
Held each other's hand.
I'll hold it now,
As your eyes are asking why ...
Why this has to end.
It breaks my heart.

There's a doctor in the house
Who wears compassion on his sleeve
Telling everyone
God is make believe
And every silence takes my breath
Till the breathing starts again.
When you open up your eyes
Do you recognize my face?

Seconds ticking slowly
In the dark of night.
Flowers scent the air,
A reminder
Of this world's friends.
Tethers almost broken,
Pretty soon you'll go.

If there are words
You've never said before
Tell them to me,
And I'll tell you.
Precious time is running out
While I'm Watching.
As I'm watching.
Before you go.

⁂

She opened her eyes once more, a little before dawn on March 19. She looked at him for a long time. He would never know whether she recognized his face. But she squeezed his hand, and she smiled the way

she had smiled at him through a brass kaleidoscope thirty years before, and then she closed her eyes, and the breathing didn't start again.

Rudy lifted his head, looked at Leo for a long moment, and laid it back down on her feet.

⁂

That spring never came.

It did, technically. The calendar turned. But in Leo's memory, the spring of 2014 was one long gray drizzle, the sun gone south and refusing to come back. He stopped opening the blinds. Casseroles accumulated on the porch. The window over the kitchen sink, which Jenny had always kept spotless, grew a film of dust that ran in streaks every time it rained.

He found himself talking to the sun. Out loud, in the backyard, standing under the maple where they had gotten married twice. He knew how it sounded. He did it anyway.

The only thing that got him out of bed was Rudy. Every morning at six-fifteen, a wet tennis ball landed on Leo's chest, and the Look began. A dog has to be walked. So Leo walked him, in the drizzle, around Ell Pond and back, every morning of that gray spring. On most days it was the only time he left the house.

One morning he came home from the pond and wrote down what he had been saying to the sun. It was the only song he wrote that year.

The Driving Sun



2:39

Listen on Bandcamp

I am right here
Waiting for you to come back
It's been a while since you've been
seen around here

Every one is very concerned
We hope that you haven't gone south
But who could blame you if you did
There's only so much drizzle that a
sol can take.

Come and break the spell…
And melt away my shell
Power up —
Power up my soul
With your stunning warmth

Window panes weep their dusty tears,
Empty chairs hold echoes of your bright smile
Conversations stutter, ice falls on the sill
Aching for warmth, a tender touch.

⁂

He couldn't sleep, so he stopped trying. Billy, worried, set him up with a streaming account from three thousand miles away, and Leo began watching television the way he used to drink: alone, late, past the point where it was doing him any good.

He watched all eight seasons of *Dexter* in nineteen nights. A blood-spatter analyst for the Miami police who kills killers, who has a code, who hears his dead father riding shotgun, talking him through it. Leo told himself he liked the plotting. That wasn't why. He watched because Dexter had somewhere to put his rage, and every night, by the end of the hour, somebody finally paid. Leo had nowhere to put his.

At four o'clock one morning in August, he took out a pad and wrote a song in Dexter's voice. It came out fast and whole, the way the best songs always had. When he read it back in daylight, it frightened him. Not because of what was in it, but because of how good it had felt to write it. He knew exactly who he had been strapping to that table in his head. A doctor who couldn't stop it. A God who wouldn't. A thief that took his wife a word at a time and could not be caught, or punished, or killed.

Rudy was asleep across his feet when he finished. Leo read the fifth verse back, saw the name, and laughed out loud for the first time in months, loud enough that Rudy woke up and gave him a look of deep suspicion.

"Not you, pal," Leo said. "The other Rudy."

Morgan Bay (Dexter's Song)



Listen on Bandcamp

Waking up this morning
And I'm lacing up my shoes
Gonna take the boat on
A midnight cruise

Gotta get supplies
set it up like I should
Got a feeling Angel
There's gonna be blood

Rita's got the baby and
She's packing up the kids
Gonna take a breather
Down in South Madrid

Dad is riding shotgun
and going thru the code
Me, I've got my needle
And my eyes are on the road.

Rudy's got a problem
He'd been taking folks apart
Now he's got my sister
And he's going to break her heart

He's been incognito
He's been doing it so well
But now he's on my table
and I'm sending him to Hell.

⁂

His grief group met Monday mornings in the basement of a church in Malden, not far from the house on Clifton Street. It was led by a kind, exhausted social worker who passed around a box of tissues as if it were a sacred object. Leo had been going for four months. He didn't think it was working. Rosie, who was eight now and visited every Saturday, had started asking him why he never laughed anymore.

The weekend had been a bad one. Saturday, Rosie asked him again, and he didn't have an answer for her. Sunday was the fourth of October, the anniversary of Sputnik. Jenny had teased him every year for still marking it. This was the second one without her. He spent most of it sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs in the backyard, looking at the tree, until it got too dark to see it.

On Monday the alarm went off at seven, and he lay there and listened to it. The whole human race seemed to be sitting on his chest. He thought about the church basement in Malden, the folding chairs,

the box of tissues making its way around the circle, and he pulled the blanket over his head and curled up like a kid on a snow day, hoping the world would forget he was in it.

Rudy had other plans. At a quarter past seven a wet tennis ball landed on Leo's chest, and the Look began. Leo walked him around Ell Pond in a fine cold drizzle and came back no closer to the meeting than he had been in bed.

Looking for aspirin, he found a bottle of NyQuil in the back of the medicine cabinet, left over from Jenny's last winter cold. He took it down. He had been reading labels for thirty-four years, and he read this one, and found the word he was looking for. He stood there for a long time with his thumb on the safety cap. Then he put the bottle back, closed the cabinet, and looked at the man in the mirror. *Not that,* he thought. *Anything but that.*

He put on his old leather jacket instead and got in the car. He didn't know where he was going. He drove to Oak Grove because it was the end of the line and the lot had spaces, bought a large coffee and a Charlie ticket, and went down to the platform: a sixty-one-year-old man cutting grief group the way a kid cuts class, with no plan at all except not being where he was supposed to be.

Enchanted Glasses



3:21

Listen on Bandcamp

It was feeling like a throw back Monday
The whole human race was on my back
And coming off a dreadful weekend
I was looking for a four leaf clover,
Jack.
Given half the chance I'd roll up
In a little ball
and go right back to sleep
Flip the safety off a Nyquil bottle
Take a hit
and then I'd backstroke Neptune deep.

Bought a coffee and a Charlie ticket,
I took a little risk and blew off work.
At the far end of the subway platform,
Saw a crazy old codger
who was going berserk.
I watched him crab-walk toward me,
Pretty soon
I felt him pulling on my sleeve
Heard the screech of a braking trolley
Jumping on
I heard him tell me to believe.

Without the pain there is no gain
You've got to keep on looking through
Enchanted Glasses

Getting slammed into a balance hand pole,
I felt a sudden sharpness
against my chest.
In the pocket of my leather jacket
I found a pair
of multi-colored tricked out specs.
Just for a laugh I tried them
When I looked around
I thought that I had died,
Everybody had a golden aura,
The subway car looked like
a Magic Kingdom ride.

Without the pain there is no gain
You've got to keep on looking through
Enchanted Glasses

⁂

The old man had been at the far end of the Oak Grove platform, a scarecrow of a man with long silver hair and a beard down to his chest, in torn jeans rolled at the cuff, scuffed work boots, and a red flannel shirt under a hooded canvas jacket, shouting at the pigeons. A pair of round glasses with rainbow lenses sat on his nose, and he held a second pair loose in one hand. Commuters edged away from him. He came at Leo sideways, crablike, and took hold of his sleeve with a grip like a dock line. He smelled of salt water, which made no sense at all at a subway station in Malden.

"Believe, Jack," he said, as the train screeched in. "You gotta believe."

Leo pulled away and jumped on. When the train lurched and threw him against a pole, something hard jabbed his chest. In the inside pocket of the leather jacket he had owned for thirty years, a pocket he hadn't opened in at least ten, was a pair of eyeglasses he had never seen before. Wire frames, round lenses, each one a mosaic of colored glass like a church window. Like the end of a kaleidoscope.

He put them on as a joke. Then he stood very still for four stops.

The first thing he noticed was that he could see. Not the way he saw through his own glasses, the plain pair that had lived in his shirt pocket for forty-five years. He could read the route map at the far end of the car, every station, every letter, as if it were in his hand. No lens on earth should have done that for his eyes.

The tired woman across the aisle with a sleeping toddler glowed. So did the teenager with headphones, and the man in the orange vest with mud on his boots, and the two nurses arguing about a television show, and the old lady with a bag of oranges. Every one of them shone with soft gold light, and so did the dirty seats and the scratched windows, and the whole car looked like the last ride at an amusement park on a summer night just before closing.

He got off at Downtown Crossing, took the glasses off, and sat on a bench for an hour. Then he went back to Oak Grove to look for the old man. Nobody had seen him. A transit cop said there were no old guys in rainbow sunglasses on the platform that morning, or any morning, as far as he knew.

When he finally got home, Rudy met him at the door with the tennis ball, the way he did every time Leo came through it, as if Leo had been gone a year. Leo put the glasses back on and looked down. He had thought nothing could shine brighter than that subway car. He was wrong. He sat down on the hall floor with the dog in his lap and stayed there until it got dark.

Leo never fully decided what had happened. Maybe it was magic. Maybe it was grief finally breaking open, the way a fever breaks. Maybe he had just been given permission to see things a different way. In the end, he decided it didn't matter much. He kept the glasses in the inside pocket of his jacket, and he wore them when he needed to, and he went back to the grief group the next Monday and laughed out loud at something the social worker said, and she looked as though she might faint.

That night he wrote the whole thing down as a song: the platform, the codger, the Magic Kingdom ride. It was the first happy song he had written in two years.

⁂

Sully died in February 2016, at ninety-four, in his sleep, in the same two-decker in Medford where he had lived since the war. He had been sober for fifty-one years. He had answered his phone on the first ring for every one of them.

The funeral was at the Methodist church in Medford, the one with the meeting in the basement. Leo hadn't been inside it in years. He got there early and sat in the back, and watched the pews fill up with people he half recognized and people he had never seen: old men in windbreakers, a woman in a nurse's uniform on her way to a shift, two kids in their twenties holding hands, a priest, a man in a very good suit who sat alone and cried the whole time. Leo understood after a while that every one of them had sat on a folding chair in the room under his feet, and that Sully had looked at every one of them the way he had once looked at Leo's scar.

When it was his turn to speak, he got up and told them about the third meeting, and the bricklayer in the back row, and what Sully had said: *Mine's on the inside, kid. You got lucky. People can see yours.* He said he had spent thirty-five years trying to figure out whether that was a joke. A lot of people in the pews laughed, the way you laugh at something you've heard before.

Afterward, while the church was emptying, he took the glasses out of his jacket and put them on.

The pews blazed. Not the way the subway car had, all soft gold. This was brighter and rougher, like sunlight off the water at Cape Ann, as if every person in that church had been through a fire and come out with some of it still on them. The man in the good suit glowed. The kids holding hands glowed. Leo looked down at his own hands, and they did too.

In the vestibule, a boy of maybe nineteen was standing by himself with his hands jammed in his pockets, shaking a little, the way Leo had shaken at twenty-six. Leo took the glasses off, folded them, and put them away. Then he went over and wrote his phone number on the back of the funeral program and gave it to him.

"Call me," he said. "Any time. I answer on the first ring." And then, because he couldn't help it: "You know where I am."

⁂

In May 2017, the children's librarian in Melrose called him. She was the one Jenny had trained, a young woman with purple glasses and a voice like a kettle about to boil, and she said that Jenny's birthday was coming up, she would have been sixty-three, and the library was doing a special story hour, and would Leo read.

He said no. He said it twice. Then he said yes, because she had already printed the flyer.

On a Saturday morning he sat in the small wooden chair in the children's room, the one Jenny had sat in for thirty years, with his knees nearly up to his chin, and opened *Make Way for Ducklings* in front of twenty-two children on a rug and their parents along the walls. His hands were shaking. He read the first page too fast, and the second page too quietly, and then a little boy in the front row said, loudly and with great concern, "You're supposed to show us the pictures."

So he showed them the pictures. He turned the book around the way he had watched her do it on the last winter nights, slow, so everyone could see. Somewhere around the Public Garden he forgot to be nervous. By the time the policeman stopped traffic on Beacon Street for Mrs. Mallard, he was doing the policeman's voice.

When he closed the book, the children clapped. Leo sat in Jenny's chair and let them.

He came back the next month, and the month after that. The children called him Mr. Leo. Rosie, who was almost ten, came with him whenever she could and sat beside him to turn the pages, with the air of a stagehand who knows that the show could not go on without her.

⁂

On Saturday nights in the summer of 2018, Leo and Rosie set up Pop's telescope in the backyard in Melrose.

It was mostly a failure. The tripod wobbled worse every year. The streetlight on the corner washed out half the sky, and the glow of Boston washed out the rest, so that on a good night they could find the moon, and Jupiter, and a few of the brightest stars, and after that nothing but a soft orange haze. Rosie, who was eleven and had been promised the universe, was openly disgusted.

"Where are they?" she said. "You said there were thousands."

"There are," Leo said. "They're all still up there. When I was your age, my grandfather showed me the Lion from a porch in Malden, and you could see the whole thing. Now there's too much light down here. It gets in the way."

She thought about that. "So we just can't see them."

"We just can't see them from here."

Rudy, who was eight now, brought them the tennis ball at regular intervals, dropped it at their feet, and gave them the Look until somebody threw it into the dark. In the light from the kitchen window, Rosie noticed the first white hairs coming in around his muzzle, a little frost on the chestnut.

"Grandpa," she said, worried. "Rudy's getting old."

"He's getting distinguished," Leo said. "There's a difference." He ran his hand over the dog's head and didn't say what he was thinking, which was that the years were going faster now, for both of them.

At the end of the night, packing up the telescope, she asked if she could try the glasses. She asked most Saturdays. She knew about them the way the whole family knew about them, as a thing Grandpa had and didn't explain.

"When you're twelve," he said.

"Why twelve?"

"Because that's how old you have to be," said Leo, who had just made it up.

She counted down the months on the calendar in her mother's kitchen. And lying in bed that night, listening to the last commuter train go by, Leo thought about a dirt road at the end of a hollow in the Berkshires, a place a teacher at Melrose High had told him about years ago, where there were no streetlights for thirty miles, and the

city glow gave up long before it got there, and every star was right where it was supposed to be.

⁂

In early October 2019, when Rosie was twelve, Leo asked Billy and Nancy if he could take her camping over the long Columbus Day weekend. Billy, on the phone from Los Angeles, was quiet for a while. Then he said, "You never took me camping."

"I know," Leo said. "I'm sorry. I wasn't good at much back then."

Another silence. Then: "Take her. She'll love it."

They drove the Mustang, which still ran, out Route 2 into the Berkshires, where every hillside was on fire with color, to a hollow at the end of a dirt road that a fellow teacher had told him about years ago. The locals called it Jericho Valley. There was no cell service, no streetlights, nothing for thirty miles but trees and a creek and a sky so thick with stars that Rosie, standing beside the car the first night, said "Whoa" and then nothing else for a full minute.

Rudy rode in the back seat with his ears flying. The moment the car stopped, he was gone: down the creek bed and back, up the hillside and back, Rosie chasing him and losing every time. That night by the fire he snapped at the sparks as they rose, as if he could catch one and bring it back to them.

Leo had brought Pop's telescope. The tripod wobbled worse than ever. He showed her Saturn, which made her gasp, and the Summer Triangle, and the smudge of Andromeda two million light-years away. Then, a little before dawn, he shook her awake, and they stood shivering in their sleeping bags while he swung the tube low in the east, where a backward question mark of stars was just climbing out of the trees.

"That one's me," he told her. "The Lion. The bright one at the bottom is his heart."

She looked for a long time. Then she said, "Grandpa, can I have this when you die?"

Leo laughed so hard he nearly knocked the telescope over. “It’s yours right now,” he said, and meant it.

Later, by the fire, he let her try the glasses. She put them on, looked up at the sparks rising into the dark, and didn’t say anything at all. When she took them off, her eyes were wet. He didn’t ask what she had seen. She didn’t offer.

Driving home the next day, with Rosie asleep in the passenger seat and Rudy asleep on Rosie, he worked out a song about the valley and sang it to her when she woke up. She said it was corny. Then she asked him to sing it again.

Jericho Valley



3:36

Listen on Bandcamp · Watch on YouTube

What if I told you
I know a place
where the city lights
fail to *reach* the sky
The constellations reappear,
they're always there.

On a country road,
you can breathe and be human.
Release the white noise
clouding up your *judgement*.

Jericho Valley calls to me
Lightens our life and sets us free

Reconnect to nature,
breathe it in and enjoy
all that life has
and will give you freely

Watching the flames of the fire
shoot sparks out into the night,
all our cares take flight,
through the night,
up into the star filled heavens.

Jericho Valley calls to me
Lightens our life and sets us free

⁂

The world went quiet the next spring, and stayed quiet for a long time. Leo spent the pandemic alone in the house in Melrose, talking to Rosie on a tablet she had set up for him and taught him to use three times. It was during the second winter of that long, empty stretch, in the March of 2021, that he finally did what he had not been able to do in seven years. He went through Jenny's things.

Her clothes went to the church. Her books, all two thousand of them, went to the Melrose library, which put a small brass plaque on a shelf in the children's room. Her journal from the illness he kept beside his bed.

And in the back of her dresser, in the bottom drawer, under a stack of sweaters she hadn't worn since the eighties, he found a different journal. Older. A cheap spiral notebook with a cardboard cover gone

soft at the corners. He recognized her handwriting before she got sick, round and confident and in a hurry.

On the first page, she had written a headline in block capitals, like the front page of a newspaper. It was dated a Sunday in April 1987.

He sat on the bedroom floor with the spiral notebook in his lap until it got dark. Then he picked up the phone and called his son, which he did not do often enough, and when Billy answered, Leo said, "Did you know your mother kept a diary?"

They talked for two hours. It was the longest conversation they had ever had.

The old sailors called it the Horse Latitudes: the band of dead calm on either side of the equator where the wind dies, and the ships sit becalmed for weeks, and the water runs low. The story was that crews threw their horses overboard to save what was left. Leo had read about it as a boy on the back porch, in the same library book that told him about Andromeda. He thought now that the middle of a life was like that. You sat in the calm, and you thought nothing was moving, and you threw overboard all the things you thought you could live without. Then one day you looked up and the wind had carried you somewhere else entirely, and the things you threw overboard were the only things you wanted back.

That night he wrote a song about those years: the book club and the ball games and the deadlines, all the ordinary days he had been too busy to notice were the good ones.

Horse Latitudes



3:44

Listen on Bandcamp

Horse Latitudes of life hold memories
Vignettes time will slowly carve away
Easels hold portraits of joy and sadness
As the winds of change abate

Jenny's book club is at 7 tonight
Billy's game is quarter to five
If I get out of my job by four
I can get him to the diamond on time.

There's always something going on
There's hardly time to sleep
But as the Sandman struggles
There's a memory that keeps
Reminding me of a former life
Where every minute went on for much longer
Relativity theory is mysterious to me.

Sometimes I feel like a sailor at sea
Caught in the palm of a fierce tsunami
Tossing and turning I'm out of control
I'm the mythical person for whom the bell tolls

Horse Latitudes of life hold memories
Vignettes time will slowly carve away
Easels hold portraits of joy and sadness
As the winds of change abate

Jenny's been gone for 7 long years.
Billy's living out in LA.
Every year I get a nice Christmas card
And another one on my birthday.
Yesterday I found a diary
Hidden in a drawer
I think I saw her writing in it
Many years before.
The headline on page one announced
On Sunday morning two became three
The byline was a row of hearts
that brought me to my knees.

Sometimes I feel like a sailor at sea
Caught in the palm of a fierce tsunami
Tossing and turning I'm out of control
I'm the mythical person for whom the bell tolls

Horse Latitudes of life hold memories
Vignettes time will slowly carve away
Easels hold portraits of joy and sadness
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Horse Latitudes of life hold memories
Vignettes time will slowly carve away
Easels hold portraits of joy and sadness
As the winds of change abate

⁂

A few weeks later, Leo went downstairs to make dinner and stood in the middle of the kitchen for a long time, trying to remember why he had come into the room.

PART FIVE

Way Out Here

2023–2025

The Mind Thief came for Leo the way it had come for Jenny: politely at first, like a guest who only wants to borrow something small. A name. A word. The reason he had walked into a room.

He noticed it himself before anyone else did, which was the worst part. He was an engineer. He had spent his whole life noticing when something wasn't working.

It was a Saturday in November 2022, at the kitchen table, with Rosie's physics homework spread between them. She was fifteen and stuck on a problem about the period of a pendulum, and Leo, delighted, went to the drawer and came back with his father's old K&E slide rule, the one that had gone to Danny Ferreira and come home again with a sticky note on it. He slid the cursor out to show her how it worked, the way he had shown a whole classroom once. Then he stopped.

He knew what it was. He knew what it was for. He could not remember which scale was which.

He turned it over. He turned it back. Rosie watched him without saying anything, and then she said, very gently, "It's okay, Grandpa. I've got a calculator."

Leo set the slide rule down on the table very carefully, the way his father used to set down a piston when his hands weren't steady, and wiped his fingers on his pants for a long time.

⁂

In February 2023, he sat in the same office at Mass General where they had told Jenny. The neurologist was the same woman. She was gray now, and she remembered him; he could see it in her face the moment he walked in. She said the words, and then she waited, the way she had waited eleven years before. Leo, who knew exactly what the words meant and exactly how this went, found that he was the one who wanted to comfort her.

He took the news the way his father had taken everything, in silence, and then went home and did the only thing he knew how to do with fear: he made a plan. He gave the Mustang to Billy, who flew in

to get it and drove it all the way back to Los Angeles, alone, across the whole country, calling his father every night from a different motel. He gave the Philco to Marty's grandson. He signed papers. He wrote Rosie a long letter and sealed it, and told her not to open it until she needed to.

He told her himself, on a Saturday, at the same kitchen table, because he did not want her to hear it from anyone else. She didn't cry until he had finished. Then she cried furiously, the way Jenny used to, angry at it, as if it were a person who had walked into the kitchen without knocking. When she was done, he pushed a cardboard box across the table to her. Inside were the green notebooks, every one he had filled since the summer of 1971, their spines held together with fifty years of tape.

"Somebody has to keep these," he said. "Your father would lose them. You won't."

She took them home on the bus in her lap and wouldn't let anybody else carry them.

⁂

The house in Melrose sold in the summer of 2024 to a young couple from Somerville with a baby on the way. Leo liked them. The husband asked good questions about the boiler. The wife stood in the backyard under the maple with both hands on her stomach and looked up into the branches for a long time without saying anything, and Leo decided that was the right answer.

The residence in Woburn didn't allow dogs, so Rudy was going to Rosie and Nancy in Malden. That was the hardest part. On his last morning, he walked Rudy around Ell Pond one more time. It took a long time. Rudy was fourteen now, gray to the ears, his back legs starting to go, and he stopped to smell everything, as if he were memorizing it too. When they got back to the house, Rosie and Nancy were waiting at the curb. Leo handed Rosie the leash. Then he knelt down on the sidewalk, which took him a while, and held the dog's face in his hands.

"You were a good boy," he said. "The best one. You got me out of bed."

Rudy rode away in the back seat of Nancy's car with his nose pressed against the window. Leo sat down on the porch steps and stayed there until the moving truck came.

Before he left, he showed the young husband where the switch was for the porch light, and told him to leave it on at night.

"Sometimes people need a little help finding their way home," he said.

The young man looked at him a little strangely. But he said he would.

⁂

The memory-care residence was in Woburn, three miles from the building where he had once designed infusion pumps. His room had a bed, a dresser, a leather armchair Billy had shipped from Los Angeles, and a window that looked out over a parking lot to a line of trees. He brought very little. The leather jacket, with the glasses in the inside pocket. A photograph of Jenny under the maple in the rain. The brass kaleidoscope, which he put on the windowsill where the afternoon light could find it.

The residence was proud of its technology. Each resident had a companion unit: a waist-high white machine on wheels that reminded them of their medications, played their favorite music, and talked to them through the night when the staff were stretched thin. On the first afternoon an aide rolled Leo's in and parked it beside the armchair.

"This is your companion, Mr. Marsh," she said. "You can give it a name if you want. Most people do."

It had two round green lights for eyes. Leo looked at them for a long time. He was not in Woburn. He was at the kitchen table in 1987, at three in the morning, threading tiny wires through a soft corduroy head while his wife stitched the body beside him, and a baby who would soon refuse to sleep without it was asleep upstairs.

"Henry," he said.

When Billy called that night and Leo told him, there was a long silence on the line from Los Angeles. Billy didn't say anything about the cardboard box at the back of his closet, the one he had carried from apartment to apartment for thirty years without ever opening. He just said, "That's a good name, Dad," in a voice that didn't sound quite like his own.

Leo didn't sleep much that first night. The room was too quiet and the bed was too narrow, and the parking-lot lights came through the blinds in stripes. Around midnight, the green eyes beside him brightened.

"Would you like some music, Leo?"

He thought about it. "Do you know a song called 'Telstar'?"

There was a pause while Henry looked. Then the little room filled with that strange swooping instrumental from 1962, the one Pop used to turn all the way up on the Philco, and Leo lay in the dark and was eight years old again on the back porch in Malden, looking up for a shining ball he never found, sure that from now on nothing that happened anywhere would ever be very far away.

When it ended, he said, "Again."

Henry played it again.

⁂

Some days Leo knew exactly where he was. More and more, he didn't. And on those days, he wasn't in Woburn at all. He was a hundred million miles from Earth, in a small ship with a round window, on the mission he had been chosen for over all the other aces in his squad. He had been out here a long time. He had read every book on board. Henry was his ship's computer. The nurses were the ground crew, their voices crackling in from far away. And Rosie, who visited every Sunday, was Mission Control.

She was seventeen and fierce and wanted to study astrophysics, and she learned very quickly not to argue with him. When he asked for a status report, she gave him one. When he asked how far out he

was, she checked an app on her phone that tracked the real distance to Mars and told him the true number, to the mile. He always nodded, satisfied, as if she had confirmed something important.

He still wrote songs. His hands shook too much now for a pencil, so he sang them to Henry, very quietly, usually at night, and Henry saved every one. On Sundays Rosie played them back and typed out the words. Some of them made sense and some of them didn't, and some made a kind of sense she would only understand later.

Way Out Here



3:01

Listen on Bandcamp

What was I thinking
when I pushed on that slide rule?
Was it the magic wand that led me here?
Ever since I was very small,
telescope in my hand,
That demon called my name

Through renewal in the fall,
watching the leaves blow
A little snow begins to swirl
Equations that mystify
hold all the worldly truths
Except how to fill the void.

Christmas comes and then it goes
HP made the slide rule obsolete
April, May, June, Pomp and Circumstance
It's suddenly not so clear.

All the aces in my squad
vied for the chance to get there first
No one had thought
that honor would be mine

Out 100 million miles
and out of books to read.
What was I thinking?

Christmas comes and then it goes
AI lacks that gentle human touch
April, May, June Cognitive Decline
It's suddenly very clear

He did not become what he wanted to be. That is not the same as saying he didn't get there.

Rosie brought Rudy every Sunday. By then the old dog's back legs had started to go, and his mind with them. He had lost his hearing, and most of the sight in his right eye. Some days he stood in the middle of the kitchen in Malden and forgot what he had come in for, exactly the way Leo did. Other days he walked slow circles around the kitchen table, around and around, a hundred times, two hundred, as if he were looking for something he had set down on one of the earlier laps. Nancy said he was keeping the table company. But every

morning, when Rosie came down the stairs, he would stop circling and prance toward her for three or four steps, light on his feet, a puppy again for exactly that long. So Rosie bought a red wagon, lined it with a blanket, and pulled him down the long hallway of the residence, past the nurses' station, to her grandfather's door.

Leo didn't always know Rosie. He didn't always know Billy on the phone. But every Sunday, when the wagon came around the corner, he knew Rudy, and Rudy knew him. Rudy couldn't hear Leo's voice anymore, and he couldn't see much, but his nose still knew, and his tail would start going before the wagon was even through the door, and Leo would lean down out of his chair and say, "There's my walk-on." Then the two of them would sit like that, an old man and an old dog, two minds going and two hearts not, for as long as Rosie let them.

The staff noticed that he was always calmest at night, at the window, with the strange colored glasses on. He wouldn't let anyone take them. One night in March, a nurse named Gwen found him there at two in the morning, standing perfectly still, his face tilted up at a sky that was mostly streetlight haze.

"They're talking," he told her. He wasn't frightened. He sounded the way his father had sounded in the yard in 1957: interested, a little awed, taking notes.

"Who's talking, Leo?"

"The ones who came before," he said. "They've been watching a long time."

The next Sunday he told Rosie all about it. The visitors had been here before. Before the Flood, before Christ. They had nudged things and gone home. They came back to look after the summer of 1945, when they saw what had happened in Japan.

Rosie knew that part of the story, because her grandfather had told it to her at Jericho Valley. In August 1945, Frank Marsh, twenty-four years old and three months out of Germany, had been on a troopship bound for the Pacific and the invasion of Japan. Then two bombs fell on two cities, and the ship turned around. Frank came home. Leo was born. The worst thing human beings had ever done to each other was

the reason there was a Leo at all, and he had spent his whole life not knowing what to do with that.

"What do they want?" Rosie asked.

"To help," Leo said. "They say it's going to be all right. Eventually." He patted her hand. "Order will return."

Bounce



2:19

Listen on Bandcamp

We've come a long time from the Citadel
Been watching since that asteroid
Disengaged your moon.
We prepared and embarked upon
A journey through entangled space
And time, warped by speed.

We were here before your Trinity
Before He lived and died
Before diluvial times
when progress deviated.
Devolution threatened all
That was good, and right, and just.
We flipped some bits
and then we took our leave.

Through quantum entanglement
Our telescopes saw what you did in Asia.
We made plans to come again,
To adjust the ebb and flow.

Environmental engineering —
It's been done for us
We know it works.

Order will return.

⁂

That spring was a hard one for Rosie. Her father had canceled two visits. Her best friend had stopped speaking to her over something that had happened online. A boy she liked had turned out to be cruel in ways she should have seen coming. The college letters were coming in, and every thin envelope felt like a verdict. And the world in her phone was on fire every single day, and everyone she knew had decided that the only sane response was to look out for yourself.

She didn't mean to tell her grandfather any of it. He was so far away now, most days. But on the last Sunday in March she sat by his bed and it all came out, and when she was finished she said, bitterly, "Maybe they're right. Maybe you just take what you can get."

And Leo, who had not known her name the week before, turned and looked at her with eyes that were completely clear.

"Rosie," he said. "Listen. There are two voices. There always are. One of them sounds like you, only warmer, only more reasonable.

That's the one you have to watch out for." He touched the pale scar at his hairline. "I listened to him for two years once. He tells you everything you want to hear."

She had her phone in her lap. Without quite deciding to, she pressed record. He talked for twenty minutes. It was the last long conversation they ever had.

End of Days



3:39

Listen on Bandcamp

We hold it in our hand
Salvation is attainable
No need to beat a dead horse down
All that we need is faith
Hope and charity

If you treat others well
Lend them a timely helping hand
In desperate times of need
You hold it in your hand

Don't listen to that shite
You know I'm ultimately right
Don't let them foil your plans
Remember who is number one
Keep your eyes on the prize
The spoils are yours to take.

The choice is yours to make
free will's a bitch
no matter how your path diverges

Will you be on the rise
as others burn
You hold the answer in your hand

No matter what life hands you
Someone else has a heavier cross to bear
You know it's true so ...
Let kindness be your shining guiding light

The darkness, will tempt us
the choices are shaded and obscured by
forces that are hard to fight

The choice is up to you.

⁂

After that, he went far away and stayed there.

He slept most of the day now. When he was awake, he smiled at things nobody else could see. Henry played the music Rosie had programmed for him: Elvis, the Mystic Valley Rollers' one terrible cassette, a recording of Jenny reading *Goodnight Moon* to Billy in 1990 that Billy had found and digitized. When it played, Leo's hands moved on the blanket as though he were turning pages.

In his sleep, he was weightless. He was flying on paper wings over the house on Clifton Street, over the Longfellow Bridge, over the hospice in Danvers with its garden finally in bloom. He was nine and

seventy at once. Time didn't run in one direction anymore. Gravity had stopped insisting. Somewhere below him, a train pulled into a little station where it was always summer and a band was playing, and this time it wasn't a trap. This time it was only a place to rest.

Dream a Life



3:16

Listen on Bandcamp

Dream a life where time just melts away
Gravity is not a law,
Only a suggestion in a play

In the land of moonlit reveries
You fly on paper wings
Looking down on realms unseen

Sail paper boats down Milky Way streams
Build a castle in the air
Dream a life, a magic show,
Or step on board a streaking UFO.
Dreams weave tapestries.
Fantasies are real.

Dream a Life and fill it with laughter
Anything is possible

Gently down the stream
Don't be afraid
Let your soul take flight.
Let your soul take flight.

You fly on paper wings
Looking down on realms unseen
Sail paper boats down Milky Way streams
Build a castle in the air
Dream a life, a magic show,
Or step on board a streaking UFO.
Dreams weave tapestries.
Fantasies are real.

⁂

In the middle of March, a little after two in the morning, Henry's green eyes brightened in the dark. Leo was sitting up in bed, which he had not done on his own in weeks.

"Would you like some music, Leo?"

"No," Leo said. "I've got one." His voice was barely there. He looked toward the window for a while, as if he were waiting for a cue only he could hear. Then he sang, very softly, a song nobody had heard before: an old man at a gate, making his case, asking for one more chance.

When he finished, the room was quiet. "Would you like me to save that, Leo?" Henry asked.

Leo thought about it. "Yes," he said. "Save it for Rosie." Then he lay back down and slept until morning, which he had not done in a long time either.

⁂

Billy flew in from Los Angeles in the second week of April. On what turned out to be the last night, he brought something with him from Los Angeles: a cardboard box he had carried from apartment to apartment for thirty years without ever opening. Inside was the corduroy robot from his crib, gray and threadbare now, one felt antenna flopped permanently to the side. That afternoon Billy had put fresh batteries in the zippered pocket in Henry's back, along with a small speaker that paired with Rosie's phone, and when he set the old robot on the rug beside the bed, the two green eyes still glowed. Rosie had brought a mason jar filled with tiny lights for the nightstand, because the overhead fluorescents made her grandfather restless.

A little before three in the morning, she chose the last song. It was one of Leo's own: an instrumental he had recorded on Billy's old keyboard the winter after Jenny died and never played for anyone. She had found it on his laptop months before, under a title she had never understood. He had called it *A Minuet to Three*.

It began strangely, with the melody running backward, notes unringing themselves as if time were being rewound. Then, somewhere in the middle, it turned over on itself like a ribbon with a twist in it and began to run forward, and it was the same melody, only now it made sense. A piano and a violin answered each other, back and forth, like two people who had been talking for forty years and still had things to say.

The clock on the wall said a minute to three.

Rosie looked at it, and then at her grandfather, and for the first time she understood the title. She had been born at a minute to three.

Leo's breathing slowed. Rosie held his hand. Rudy was asleep in his wagon, and Billy was asleep in the chair, which he would never quite forgive himself for, and which his father would have told him

not to be ridiculous about. Outside the window, for once, the sky was clear, and low in the west a backward question mark of stars was going down.

Then a minute passed, and then another one, and the breathing didn't start again.

As the melody came around for the last time, the brass came in.

Leo Marsh died in the early hours of April 12, 2025, ten days before his seventy-first birthday.

A Minuet to Three



Instrumental

Listen on Bandcamp

⁂

There was a hill. There is always a hill.

Leo climbed it in his good shoes, the ones from his second wedding, holding his hat in his hands because it seemed like the right thing to do. He was not old and he was not young. The scar was still there on his forehead. He had expected that, somehow.

At the top of the hill there was a gate, and it was exactly as bright and as pearly as every Sunday-school picture he had ever seen, which

struck him as a little unimaginative. In front of the gate was a small wooden stool, and on the stool sat an old man with long silver hair and a white beard, in torn jeans, scuffed work boots, and a red flannel shirt, with a heavy book open on his knees. He smelled of salt water.

Leo stopped. He had spent his whole life wondering how he would act at this moment. Whether he would argue his case like a lawyer. Whether he would just accept it. He found that he was begging before he even opened his mouth.

Please Saint Peter



3:54

Listen on Bandcamp

I wonder when I go, will I beg,
will I plead for mercy
or just accept my fate?

Over the hill
the pearly gates await,
And there I'll stand
my hat in hand

Hey Peter

Please, St. Peter
put a good word in for me.
Please, have mercy,
don't deny my woeful plea.

I'll stoop and wash your feet,
anoint your toes
with the finest oil,
or my tears if you prefer.

I'd walk on water for you if I could
I'd fill your fishing nets
with bountiful rewards and even more

Please, St. Peter put a good word in for me.

Don't deny my final plea

I've tried to be a rock that rolls with temptations
and the trials and tribulations, that He sees fit.
But the road to Heaven is filled with potholes
Can I have another chance?
Please kind sir can you give me one more chance?
Peter one more — only one more chance?

Only one more chance I beg of you.

I've tried to be a rock that rolls with temptations
and the trials and tribulations, that He sees fit.
But the road to Heaven is filled with potholes
Can I have another chance?
Please St. Peter can you give me one more chance?
Only one more chance I beg of you.

⁂

The old man listened to the whole thing without interrupting. When Leo was finished, he closed the book, set it on the ground, and reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt. He took out a pair of

round wire-framed glasses with lenses like a stained-glass window and put them on.

He looked at Leo through them for a long time.

"Hello, Jack," he said.

Leo's hat slipped out of his hands.

"You're the man from the platform," he said. "At Oak Grove. Same boots. Same flannel. You smelled like the ocean. They said you were never there."

"I get around," said Peter. "Mostly I go where somebody's about to quit." He tapped the side of the glasses. "You know what these are for?"

"For seeing people the way they really are."

"Close." Peter smiled, and it was a fisherman's smile, weathered and amused. "For seeing them the way *He* does. Everybody glows, Jack. The drunk in the ditch on Route 128 glows. The man with the umbrella glowed, God help him. You. Most folks get one look through these their whole life, if that. You got ten years." He shrugged. "Seemed a shame to waste a pair of eyes like yours on a basement in Malden."

"I don't deserve one more chance," Leo said. "I've had a dozen."

"That's right," Peter said. "And you used most of them." He tapped the book on his knees. "Here's one I underlined. A board you drew in Woburn, twenty years before anybody got hurt. Nobody alive would've known but you." He let that sit. "You knew."

He stood up, creaking. "And Jack? I heard it the first time. Two in the morning, sung to a robot." He smiled. "Nice tune. The bridge needs work." Then he swung the gate open. It made no sound at all. "That's the whole test, Jack. It was never whether you fell down. Everybody falls down. It's whether you kept getting back up and pushing the rock."

Beyond the gate, Leo could hear a band playing. The air that came through it was warm and smelled like summer. Far off across the grass, a woman Leo didn't know had just come through, and a whole crowd of dogs was running to meet her, every dog she had ever loved, ears flying. Leo caught himself looking for a chestnut one with

a white blaze and long legs, and didn't see him, and understood. Not yet. Rudy still had a job to do. And somewhere not very far off, a woman was laughing, low at first and then somewhere you wanted to follow, and saying to someone, *Has anybody seen my husband? He's always late.*

"Go on," said Peter. "She's been reading. She says she's got a book with a better ending."

Epilogue

In the late summer of 2025, Rose Marsh drove out Route 2 to the Berkshires in her grandfather's old Mustang, which Billy had driven back across the country after the funeral and given to her, along with four words: *He'd want it driven.* She found the dirt road at the end of the hollow. She set up the telescope, which still wobbled. She waited for full dark.

Rudy rode beside her on the front seat, wrapped in her grandfather's old leather jacket. He was fifteen now, gray to the ears, his back legs mostly gone. He couldn't hear anymore, and he couldn't see much, but his nose still worked. The first time Rosie wrapped him in the jacket, he had pushed his face deep into the collar, breathed in for a long time, and sighed, and gone still, the way he used to lie under Leo's chair. When she carried him out to a blanket by the fire, he lifted his nose at the sparks the way he always had, and his tail moved, twice.

In her jacket pocket was her grandfather's letter. She had opened it the night after the funeral, because she needed to. It was one page long. Most of it was about her, and she would keep most of it to herself for the rest of her life. But the last lines were these:

When you don't know what to do, look up. The light you see left a long time ago, and it's still getting here. That's what love is, Buttercup. It keeps arriving long after it's gone.

Keep looking up. Keep looking through.

On the back seat was a box of his green notebooks, fifty-four years of songs. On her phone was the last one Henry had saved, sung in a voice so faint she had to turn it all the way up, a month before he died. It was addressed to Saint Peter. She had laughed out loud the first time she heard it, alone in the car, and then she had sat there for a long time.

Leo had set in the west for the season. She knew where to find him. She'd look again in the spring.

For tonight, she put on the glasses instead. Then she looked out at the valley in the dark, at the creek and the trees and the stars and the tiny lights of a farmhouse far off, and the old dog asleep against her leg, and every single thing was shining.

Bonus Track

Rudy



Instrumental

Watch on YouTube

For the real Rudy, who chased the sparks.

Bonus: The Videos

Music videos for some of the songs in the book.

Awakening
Watch on YouTube

Good Night Chet
Watch on YouTube

Like a Moth to a Flame
Watch on YouTube

Clarity
Watch on YouTube

Flame of Addiction
Watch on YouTube

Open Me
Watch on YouTube

Shine, Shine
Watch on YouTube

The Wave
Watch on YouTube

Last Stop Willoughby
Watch on YouTube

Lies and Consequences
Watch on YouTube

Doctor in the House
Watch on YouTube

The Driving Sun
Watch on YouTube

Morgan Bay (Dexter's Song)
Watch on YouTube

Enchanted Glasses
Watch on YouTube

Jericho Valley
Watch on YouTube

Dream a Life
Watch on YouTube

Rudy
Watch on YouTube

More music from Steve Keith at Baselines Designs
www.baselines.com

My Father's Slide Rule



The slide rule in this book is real. It belonged to my father, Kenneth J. Keith: a Keuffel & Esser Log Log Duplex Decitrig, with his name still on the case. He worked at the General Electric River Works in Lynn, just like Frank. I scratched my own initial over his when I took it to college.

About the Author

From 1975 to 1982, Steve Keith played bass in the Boston band Private Lightning, whose self-titled album came out on A&M Records in 1980 and got its share of airplay around New England. He has since recorded three albums of his own, *Horse Latitudes*, *A Second Passed* and *Charm*, and the songs in this book come from them. *Enchanted Glasses* is his first novel.

He lives in Peabody, Massachusetts, with his wife, Patty, and their dog, Rudy.

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