LIGHT *from* DISTANT STARS

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Linda
(1968–2016)

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What chance did we have?
We are the children of our father.

John Steinbeck

I talk to God, but the sky is empty.

Sylvia Plath

Love is not consolation. It is light.

Simone Weil

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PART ONE

Monday, March 16, 2015

Darkness was upon the face of the deep.

Genesis 1:2

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one

The Body

Cohen Marah clears his throat quietly, more out of discomfort than the presence of any particular thing that needs clearing, and attempts to step over the body for a second time. His heel no more than lightens its weight on the earth before he puts his foot back down and sighs. He tilts his head and purses his lips, as if preparing to give a talk to an unruly child. He does not take his hands out of his pockets, worried that he will taint the scene, which in the next moment he realizes is ridiculous. This is where he works. This is where he works with his father, Calvin. His fingerprints are everywhere.

He stares down at the body again, and sadness keeps him leaning to one side. It's the physical weight of emotion, and that weight is not centered inside of him but skewed,

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imbalanced. It is not his father's slightly opened eyes looking up at him from the floor that bring down the heaviness, and it is not his father's cleanly shaven cheeks, haggard and old. It is not the way the tangled arms rest on his chest, or the way his one leg is still bent and propped up against the examination table.

No, the thing that weighs Cohen down is the shiny baldness of his father's head, the way the light reflects from it the same way it did when he was alive. The light should dim, he thinks. It should flatten out, and the glare should fade. There should be no light, not anymore.

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two

The Preacher

When Cohen was a small boy, lying on the floor under the church pews on a humid summer Sunday night, the bright ceiling lights shone. He listened to his father's voice boom through the quiet, the heavy pauses filled with scattershot responses. "Amen!" and "Preach!" and semi-whispered versions of "Hallelujah!" so hushed and sincere they sent goose bumps racing up his skinny arms.

Under the pews, on the deep red carpet, drowning in the hot, stuffy air, young Cohen drifted in and out of sleep. It was as if he had descended beneath some holy canopy and settled into the plush red carpet surrounded by a rain forest full of trees, which were actually the legs of pews and the legs of people and women's dresses draped all the way to the floor, rustling ever so slightly with the sermon. He could

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smell the hairspray and the cologne and the sweat mingling like incense, a pleasing offering to the Lord.

Far above him, like branches moving under the weight of resettling birds, people waved paper fans created out of their Sunday evening bulletins, folded an inch this way, an inch that way, stirring the air. But to no avail. Sweat came out of their pores. Sweat welled up in droplets like water on a glass. Sweat trickled down, always down. And even there, from the floor, Cohen could imagine it: the sweat that darkened the underarms of Mr. Pugitt's light blue collared shirt, the sweat Mrs. Fisher blotted from her powdery temples, the sweat that made his father's bald head shine like a beacon, and the sweat that sweetened the nape of Miss Flynne's slender neck.

Ah, his Sunday school teacher, Miss Flynne! Cohen was only nine years old in 1984, but he could tell that something about Miss Flynne opened doors into rooms where he had never wandered. Why couldn't he speak when she looked at him? Why did the lines of her body push his heart into his throat? She was all bright white smiles and straight posture and something lovely, budding.

His mother was not all smiles, not in 1984 and never before that and never since. Sometimes, from his place of repose under the church bench, he could peek out and see his mother's stern face, eyes never leaving his father. The intensity with which she followed his father's sermon was the only thing that could distract her enough to allow him to slip down onto the floor. No one else seemed to notice her lips, but Cohen did, the way she mouthed every single word to every single one of his father's sermons, as if she had written them herself. Which she had.

Sometimes, when Cohen's father said a word that didn't

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synchronize with his mother's mouth, she would pause, her eyes those of a scorned prophet, one not welcomed in her own town. Cohen could tell it took everything in her not to stand up and interrupt his father, correct him, set him back in the record's groove. But she would shake her head as if clearing away a gnat and find the cadence again. Somehow their words rediscovered each other there in the holy air, hers silent and hidden, his shouted, and Cohen's mind drifted away.

If Cohen rolled over or made too much noise or in any way reminded his mother of his existence there beneath the canopy, she hauled him back up by his upper arm or his ear or his hair, whatever she could reach, hissing admonitions, hoisting him back to the pew. He felt the eyes of the hundreds of other people on the back of his own neck, sitting there like drops of sweat, their glances grazing off his ears, skimming the top of his head, weighing down his shoulders. There was a certain weight that came with being the only son of a popular country preacher. There were certain expectations.

His sister Kaye was always there, waiting for him in the canopy, only four years older than him and sitting completely still. She had an unnatural ability to weather even the longest of sermons without so much as twitching, without moving a single muscle. Sometimes she didn't even blink for long minutes at a time. He knew. He watched her, counting the seconds. When they got older, she told him her secret to this, the things she thought about to keep her in that central spot, the stories she made up. She told him about the things in the church she would count: the wooden slats on the ceiling, the imperfections in the wooden pew, the number of pores on the back of the person's neck in front of her and how

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those tiny hairs became an endless forest through which she embarked on an adventure.

When Cohen became bored contemplating his sister's stillness, which took only moments, his gaze joined with those hundreds of other gazes, the way small streams drown into bigger ones, and he stared at his father on the stage. Cohen was transfixed by what he saw. His father reached up with his long, slender fingers and loosened his tie. He raised a pointed finger to the heavens and made a desperate plea, his voice a cadence, a rhythm, a kind of calling out, and the congregation heaved with emotion. People shouted. Women's shoulders shook with poorly suppressed sobs. Men leaned forward, their faces in their hands, as if scorched by Isaiah's coal.

Cohen's father pulled a pure white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bald head dry, and the lights shone. An usher opened the windows that ran along the east side of the building, and a cool night breeze blew through, leaking in and spreading along the floor, gathering in pools that Cohen slipped into when his mother had been taken up again by the words of her own sermon.

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three

The Sycamore

Cohen steps over his father's body, finally, reaching with his toe for the far side like a burglar in a black-and-white movie, movement exaggerated, each step a gigantic cursive letter. But even with that large first step, even after reaching as far into the future as his leg will allow, Cohen's heel comes down and touches the edge of the pool of blood, the mercury-red puddle that leaks out from under his father's neck and outlines his head like a saint's halo in stained glass.

Cohen hisses at himself for his clumsiness. He pulls his hands out of his pockets and holds on to the examination table with one hand for support, leaving a neat line of fingerprints all in a row. Each one is like the labyrinth behind Saint Thomas Church, the slowing curves circling back in on themselves, each with a middle that is never the end. He

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lifts his heel, contorts his body to try to examine the back of his foot, and there it is, a small dash of blackish red, like the sticky remains of a lollipop. He rubs his finger tightly along the heel of his shoe, transferring most of the blood from the back of his foot to his index finger. He stares at it, not knowing what to do next.

It is the blood of his father, the life that has pumped through him all these years. The blood that turned his father's face red when he shouted from the front of the church, the blood that fled and left his father's face white when he realized he had been found out, when Cohen's mother stormed out onto the baseball field, when he was told to leave the church. It is his father's blood, the same blood that in many ways is all wrapped up inside of him, pumping through his own body, circling his own maze of veins and arteries and capillaries that his teachers said could reach to the moon and back.

He sighs.

He walks through the basement holding his bloodied finger out to the side, as if it is someone else's hand entirely, as if he is looking for a trash can to put it in. His feet are still heavy as he walks a straight line past the bodies on the stainless-steel tables, past the various coffins, some open, some standing up and leaning against the wall, others closed. He feels a twinge of guilt that one of their employees will have to be the first to find his father, and for a moment that is nearly enough to send him off track. Poor Beth, if she comes back this afternoon, before anyone else. What will she do when she finds Cohen's father on the floor? Call the police? The ambulance? Cohen? Marcus, on the other hand, might faint. It would be like him to do that, to see the blood or the

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partially opened eyes of his already dead employer and drop over. The fainting funeral worker.

But Cohen does not want to be the one to find his father, not now. Did the neighbors hear the long and loud argument he had with his father last night? Did they see Cohen storm out, angry, muttering to himself? No, it would be simpler if he was not the one to find the body, if this accident was brought into the light by someone else.

It was an accident, wasn't it? He looks closer at his father, at the scene. His father wouldn't have done this to himself.

Would he?

With a deep breath, Cohen walks up the basement steps and out of the funeral home. He touches nothing on his way except the doorknob, and that he opens with his coat pulled down over his left hand.

Emotion catches him again, and his eyes well. He will never see his father again, not his smile or the tired lines of his face or his strong hands flexing away some phantom pain. Cohen wipes his eyes and clears his throat.

Outside, the city streets are quiet. It's a small, vibrant city, drifting from north to south, down toward the river. It's a quiet place in the middle of the afternoon before the children are released from school. It's a green city, cement and macadam and asphalt sharing space with sycamores and oaks and maples.

Cohen feels better. It's easy to begin to pretend he has not yet seen the body of his father when he is standing under that sky stretched tight, a sheet once white but now washed into a shade of gray. The early spring day carries a bite of winter that awakens him to his life. The air smells one moment of warm, earthy spring and the next of low, frozen, gray clouds.

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The air sneaks in around the edges of his overcoat, soaking in through his thin, worn suit, and he wonders if he has time to run home and change before going to his nephew's baseball game.

He looks at his watch. He doesn't have time. He remembers the blood on his index finger. He scans his suit, his coat, anywhere he might have accidentally rubbed his finger, anywhere he might have marked himself with his father's blood, but he doesn't see anything.

He looks up and down the sidewalk before squatting like a catcher beside one of the city's new trees growing in front of him. It is no more than three or four inches thick, a sapling. But he thinks it would be better to clean off his finger farther from the funeral home, so he stands and walks another block on Queen Street to a larger tree, a sycamore with its winter skin peeling into spring. He wipes his finger on a piece of rolled-back bark, and it is a relief, removing his father's blood from his hands. He wonders why he didn't simply wash his hands in the sink. Was he worried Beth would return? Or was he simply not thinking clearly? He feels muddled, confused, the shock of finding his father mingling with the approach of grief.

It is a relief to him that spring is coming.

Cohen looks up and down the street again. He glances at all the windows, all the dozens of windows in the dozens of houses, afraid he'll see someone looking out at him, someone watching him wipe his bloody finger on the rolled-up parchment of sycamore bark.

He feels a sob rise in his throat, thick with sadness and anger and regret. His father is dead.

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four

The Teacher

In 1984, on bleary-eyed Sunday mornings, when the Holy Spirit was less of a shout and more of a whisper, there was Sunday school with Miss Flynne. Ah, Miss Flynne, the slight young woman barely escaped from girlhood who stood meekly at the front of their chaos. She would raise her hand halfway, then use that hand to adjust her glasses, as if she had never intended to quiet them. She would clear her throat gently, then louder. She was pretty when she stood at the edge of anger, her cheeks flushed, her soft mouth a firm line.

Miss Flynne sometimes took off her shoes and socks in those moments when it seemed the chaos could never be put back inside the box, and Cohen always marveled at the exquisite whiteness of her feet, the slenderness of her toes, the bright glossy green of her toenail polish. It seemed rather

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fancy to him, and also a bit strange. Weren't her feet cold? His own mother rarely took off her socks in their house. It seemed like something the people in his church would not approve of if they knew about it.

But who in the church besides her Sunday school class would ever see her bare feet? Who would ever see her as he did in that moment, removing her shoes, her socks? She moved slowly, and he could tell she no longer heard the children but had become completely engrossed in that small unwrapping. She draped the bright whiteness of her socks over a chair at the front of the room, and that was when he saw her initials close to the top, almost hidden under a frill of lace.

HMF.

He knew the *F* stood for Flynne, but what of the *H*? The *M*? He spent those first chaotic moments of Sunday school trying to guess Miss Flynne's first and middle names.

Heather Madeline?

Harriet Madison?

Holly Miriam?

He sighed. It seemed a nice thing to contemplate on a dreary Sunday morning while the anarchy of the class boiled around him. But a certain kind of stillness settled in the room as Miss Flynne took advantage of the greatest weakness of any nine-year-old: curiosity.

At the front of the class, she situated a felt board with felt Bible characters that somehow stuck, and they stared out at Cohen. Without saying a word, Miss Flynne went about arranging the flat people on the pale blue board, and that quieted some of the Sunday school students. They wanted to see what the morning's story would be. She moved slowly,

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either out of great concern for the careful placement of the flannel people or because she was delaying the moment she would have to confront the children.

When the scene was set, she lifted her Bible up in front of her bright green eyes and spoke, and when she read the Bible, she became a proclaiming angel, and no volume level was unattainable. She was transformed from a timid mouse to some kind of powerful cherub. The children froze in place, waiting for their imminent demise.

> Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, whiles he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.

At the words "came forth fingers of a man's hand," every child finally went silent, imagining a bodiless hand carving lines in a plaster wall, frightening the most powerful man

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in the world. Jared Simms, sitting at the back of the class, sucked in his breath and held it. Little Mary Everett, the same age as Cohen but the height and weight of a five-year-old, peed in her chair. Cohen knew because she did it often and he expected it in moments like that. He saw the drops begin to drip from the metal folding seat.

The vision of a bodiless hand haunted Cohen's dreams for three solid nights, so that sometimes, even when he was awake, he thought he could see the hand coming toward him through the reflection in his window, index finger extended, preparing to write some portentous message on his own wall. Or perhaps directly on him, the way God had marked Cain.

What would that hand have written? What message could have possibly prepared nine-year-old Cohen for the future of his childhood, the crumbling of his family, or the arrival of the Beast?

He was so young. He knew nothing of messages that could terrify a king. He knew nothing of a lions' den or the heady aroma of red wine when a person's nose was deep inside the stemmed glass. He knew only of hot summer nights, lying on the sanctuary floor, listening to his father's voice rain down, or cool Sunday mornings in the basement of the church, staring from Miss Flynne's green eyes to her green toenail polish to her white socks still perched on the chair.

HMF.

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five

The Phone Call

Cohen drives into the VFW parking lot a few miles outside the city. If he keeps going for another ninety minutes, he would lose himself in Philadelphia, those endless streets and back alleys, those cratered avenues and narrow passages, the place where his mother and sister fled when he was a child. Only his sister came back. On his days off he sometimes drives into that city, vast and imposing. He likes that the streets there don't recognize him.

A few lonely cars are parked in front of the VFW, but it is a quiet building lost in between towns. He doesn't remember at any point in his entire life actually seeing anyone coming out of or going into the building. The sign out front is always changing, from "VFW Bingo Tonight" to "Oyster Soup Night" to "Pancake Breakfast This Saturday." But he

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has never seen anyone standing at the sign, arranging the letters. He smiles to himself, imagining a mysterious, bodiless hand forming the messages.

Cohen pulls around behind the VFW and follows a stone lane that leads down the hill. He can see the baseball field from there, nestled in a flat space at the bottom. A train track lines the first-base side of the diamond, and beyond that, farmers' fields go on for miles, stretching out to forest-covered hills. It's sometimes hard to imagine the city is only a few miles away, all concrete and intersections and traffic lights.

The flurries stopped at some point during the drive, as if they suddenly remembered it's March and there is no real place for them. The sky is low and cold. A sporadic breeze whips the treetops before fading to nothing.

Back when he was nine years old and his parents were still together and they all lived happily in the country, he rode his bike all over this area, where the air smelled like hay or manure or spring mud depending on the day, and where you could tell the month by what was growing in the fields or how tall the corn was. He'd wandered the wide creek beds, forded every stream, fished in every bend. Sometimes, like today, it feels almost unbearable, the presence of his past.

He gets out of the car and walks gingerly through the soggy grass, the earth giving way beneath him. He sees three small children squatting close to the train tracks. Each of them is in their own world, digging into an old sandpile with small sticks, ignoring the cold day, the low clouds, the expansive fields that threaten to engulf them. They seem completely fine with their own smallness, and they go on poking the earth like tiny mosquitoes on the back of an elephant.

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The flurries come down again, and they provide a stark contrast to the boys playing baseball, one team wearing candy-green uniforms, the other in stop-sign red. Both teams are sponsored by local businesses, the names of which are emblazoned in large, all-capital letters across the front of the uniforms. Parents offer up encouragement, then silence swells as each pitch spins toward the catcher.

Cohen played on this field when he was young, on a team sponsored by a local business, Lengacher's Cheese. Their hats and uniforms were a pumpkin orange with white letters. He remembers the adjustable bands on the hats with their small line of tabs that fit neatly into the line of holes. He remembers how the leather glove felt on his hand, smooth and worn and essential, as if he had managed to love baseball enough that his own hand had grown, expanded, and padded itself. But not all of it is the same: the old chain-link fences have been replaced with new ones, and the bases actually attach to the field—when he was young, they were rubber mats you threw down and tried not to slip on.

Cohen drifts in behind his sister—she stands on the ground beyond the end of the aluminum bleachers, eyes intent on the field. He stops and stares at the back of her for a moment. Everything seems forced now that he knows what he knows about their father. How should he approach her? How should he talk to her? He is nervous that he'll slip up, say something he shouldn't yet know. He takes a deep breath and smiles and wraps his arms around her from behind, pinning her arms to her side. He picks her up a few inches off the ground.

"Whoa!" he exclaims. "You *are* heavy with child."

She pushes at his arms and he lowers her back to the

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ground. She shakes her head. "Always tactful, my brother," she says in her scratchy voice, and Cohen thinks again that if someone didn't know her, they'd assume she was a smoker. She rolls her eyes. "Besides, as you well know, it's 'heavy with children.'" She cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, "Let's go, Johnny!"

She turns to Cohen and puts one arm around his shoulders in a side hug, as if trying to make up for implying he isn't tactful. He recognizes the gesture. She is so kind she can't even pretend to insult without immediately apologizing.

He nudges up against her. "Still two babies in there, huh?"

She rolls her eyes again, doesn't even dignify his question with a response.

"Where's he playing? I can't see him."

"He's on first," she says.

"That's where all the action is."

"Yep."

"C'mon, Johnny!" Cohen shouts, wanting to make sure his nephew knows he's there. The boy is ten and in a phase where all he talks about is baseball. Well, he's also in an astronomy phase, so it's mostly baseball and outer space.

Cohen remembers those days—the crack of the bat, the feel of the ball nestling into his glove, the smacking sound of a tight catch. These memories of childhood baseball are almost primitive. They awaken something instinctual in him, something basic. These feelings are connected to his father, and a deep sadness returns, weighs him down, always flanked with anger and regret.

He remembers baseball with his father. The ball floated through the air, red seams spinning like the rings around a planet. There was always the smell of cut grass, the clippings

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gathering on his white shoes. He reached up and caught the ball, and his father shouted something encouraging so that he swelled from the deepest part of his chest. He smiled and yet always tried to hide his smile—it seemed unmanly to be affected by praise. It seemed one should take it in stride, as if it was expected. He threw the ball back to his father, harder this time, and again he watched the spinning seams, again he heard the ball smack deep into the leather.

He feels for his phone, deep in his overcoat pocket. A wave of guilt washes over him as he looks at the screen. No one has called. How long would it take for someone to find his father? Would they call him first, or would they call the police? It would be so much easier if they called him first—he could go to the funeral home, he could be the second one there. This would excuse the presence of anything out of the ordinary: his fingerprints, or that thin slice of a mark in the otherwise perfectly round puddle of blood. He begins to doubt his decision not to call the police.

"Hello. Earth to Cohen," Kaye says playfully.

"Sorry."

"I said, have you talked to Dad this afternoon?"

He swallows hard. "Nah. No. I've been out and about."

She nods. "Strange," she says, more to herself than to Cohen. "I don't know why he's not answering his phone."

It's Cohen's turn to nod. He tries to shout for his nephew again, tries to cheer him on, but there's a strange obstruction in his throat, like a kink in a hose, and he stops halfway through, coughs.

"Are you sick?" she asks without looking at him.

"Allergies, I think."

She nods again, stepping to the side and trying to see

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around a newcomer who has stopped directly in front of them. "This weather's been crazy. Makes my skin ache. Does Dad need one of us? Didn't two come in last night?" She hugs her round stomach close, shivering as another burst of wind sweeps down the hill.

"Say I should be there, Kaye. You don't have to beat around the bush."

"Well," she says, casting him a glance, "I can't do everything around here. I am growing humans, after all."

He loves her. Without his father, she will be all he has left. She and Johnny. And the twins, whoever they end up being. He doubts his resolve for a moment. She means more to him than every other person in his life combined. Why shouldn't he tell her he found their father? Why didn't he call someone? What good was this deception?

He wraps an arm around Kaye's shoulders. "I hear you. Yeah, okay, I'll make my way over there. I planned on working all night tonight anyway. Are you coming in tomorrow?"

She's not listening. She's looking back at the field and hopping up and down. "Yes!" she screams. "Nice catch, Johnny!" She looks at Cohen and punches him proudly in the shoulder. Her eyes say, *Did you see that?*

"Do they always play in this weather?" he asks, catching snowflakes as the flurries turn into a legitimate snow, the kind that sticks to the grass and the leaves and coats the tops of people's heads, the slopes of their shoulders.

She shrugs. "It's rare to have this kind of weather during baseball season. But they do seem to start earlier every year."

Cohen looks over his shoulder and can no longer see the faraway hills beyond the train tracks. The wind picks up, driving the snow in horizontal lines, and everyone in the

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bleachers pulls their coats closer or plunges their hands into their pockets. The boys look like turtles, all of them pulling their heads down inside their collarbones, their shoulders rising against the weather. They blow into their hands, and their breath clouds out in bursts of white.

Many things happen at once. The umpire, dressed in black and wearing a black face mask, stands up and waves both arms back and forth like a man on the tarmac waving off an airplane, calling off the game. The snow falls harder and mixes with sleet, stinging the skin. The train whistle sounds from far off, a distant warning.

And Cohen's phone rings. He feels it buzz in his pocket, like a lost bee.

But he's caught up in the mass movement of the fleeing crowd shielding themselves from the sleet and the snow, everyone trying to find their child so they can move to the shelter of their car. There is the sound of aluminum baseball bats being thrown into a canvas bag, the clanging of soles banging their way down the wet aluminum bleachers. The coaches' sons have been charged with retrieving the bases, and they disappear into the whiteout. The sleet taps against the chain-link fence posts with the lightest of pings.

Cohen reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. "Hello? Beth?" he shouts into the phone, the wind crackling the sound in his receiver. He cannot hear her over the sound of the baseball bats and the shouting and the snowstorm and the sleet on metal. And the train whistle again, closer.

"Wait a minute," he says without waiting for a reply. He looks up. He remembers the children playing beside the train tracks, but he can't see the tracks anymore through the heavy

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snow, so he veers over in that direction. The train whistle sounds again, and he feels panic rising, a sickening sense of being too slow to stop a future he can nearly see. Once, he had to work with a body hit by a train. He had to walk parents in to view their teenage child, pieced back together with what had been found.

"Hey!" he shouts blindly into the storm, holding his phone at his side, getting closer to the tracks. "Where are you kids at? Get out of here!" The train approaches, only a few hundred yards away, a single bright light pointing the way. "Hey!"

He pushes his way through the snow like someone lost among a clothesline of drying sheets. He arrives at the sandpile. The children are gone. They've fled the storm too.

When the train passes, it brings a sense of anger with it, and those far-off hidden fields roil in its wake. Its whistle blast fills Cohen—in that second, it is everything. He waits fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, and the train passes.

He turns and tries to find Kaye, sees she is already in her car, and remembers Beth is on the phone. Beth, who thinks she is delivering the most horrible news she could possibly bear. Beth, who must have walked into the funeral home basement and found his father.

Cohen crosses the parking lot. Headlights and brake lights are everywhere as the teams disperse, and car exhaust belches out into the early spring parking lot.

Where is the sun? he wonders. *Where is the sun?*

"Beth, are you still there?" he says into the phone while jogging toward Kaye's car. He holds up one finger to Kaye, asking her to wait.

"Cohen, what are you doing? Are you listening to me? Did you hear what I said?" Beth asks. Her voice sounds drawn

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out, like a long string of sap about to break under its own weight.

"No," he says. "It's snowing here. It's windy. I can't hear anything. I'm with Kaye."

"Cohen," Beth says. "It's your father. It's Calvin."

Cohen nods, and relief rushes over him. Finally this part will be over. Finally someone has found his father and has reported it and he can be brought into the situation naturally. Finally he is allowed to know what he already knows.

"What?" Cohen asks, trying to sound surprised. "What about him?" It's very difficult sounding surprised when you know what's coming. You have to be a fine actor to pull that one off, and Cohen is no actor. In fact, he's a terrible liar. He walks up to Kaye's car and motions for her to roll the window down. He wants to be able to tell her as soon as he gets the news from Beth.

Kaye rolls down her window, and the swirling snow blows inside. "Goodness, it's cold, Cohen. What's wrong?" she asks, shielding her eyes against the bright white outside the car.

"It's Dad," Cohen says, holding his hand over the phone.

"What do you mean, it's Dad?" Kaye asks, going from annoyed to concerned in the space of two seconds flat. Suddenly the snow does not bother her. Suddenly the sleet rat-tat-tapping on the glass windshield and bouncing into the car and glancing off the steering wheel is nothing. The tiny white particles cling to her sweater, her eyelashes, lodging themselves in the space between her fingers.

Cohen holds up a finger again, and the snowflakes and sleet continue to fill his hair, ricochet off his face. "Beth, what's wrong?" he asks, waiting for the words, "Your father

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is dead" or "Your father has died" or "There's been a terrible accident." He's eager for those words so that he can stop pretending. So that he can know, legitimately, what has happened.

"Cohen, what's wrong with you?" Beth shouts. "Why won't you listen to me? Your father is on his way to the hospital! You and Kaye need to go there right away!"

"Wait," Cohen says. His face feels suddenly numb. He wonders if this is what it feels like to have a stroke. "Dad's not—wait. What?"

"Something happened," Beth says, and she starts to cry. Her words come out an octave higher. "There was an accident. Or someone did something. No one's telling me anything. But your dad. He's . . . You need to get over here. Both of you."

"He's not—dead? Is he?" Cohen asks, and he cannot hide the complete disbelief in his voice.

"Not yet," Beth says, taking a deep breath. "Please, Cohen. Please come to the hospital. Hurry."

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