A town isn't a town without a bookstore. It may call itself a town, but unless it's got a bookstore, it knows it's not foolin' a soul.

—Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

Home is where I want to be, but I guess I'm already there.

—Talking Heads, "This Must Be the Place"

WE ARE INEVITABLE

The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs

They say it took the dinosaurs thirty-three thousand years to die. Thirty-three millennia from the moment the asteroid slammed into the Yucatán Peninsula to the day that the last dinosaur keeled over, starving, freezing, poisoned by toxic gases.

Now, from a universal perspective, thirty-three thousand years is not much. Barely a blink of an eye. But it's still thirty-three thousand years. Almost two million Mondays. It's not nothing.

The thing I keep coming back to is: Did they know? Did some poor T-rex feel the impact of the asteroid shake the earth, look up, and go, *Oh, shit, that's curtains for me*? Did the camarasaurus living thousands of miles from the impact zone notice the sun darkening from all that ash and understand its days were numbered? Did the triceratops wonder why the air suddenly smelled so different without knowing it was the poison gases released by a blast that was equivalent to ten billion atomic bombs (not that atomic bombs had been invented yet)? How far into that thirty-three-thousand-year stretch did they go before they understood that their extinction was not looming—it had already happened?

The book I'm reading, *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs* by Steve Brusatte, which I discovered mis-shelved with atlases a few

months back, has a lot to say on what life was like for dinosaurs. But it doesn't really delve into what they were thinking toward the end. There's only so much, I guess, you can conjecture about creatures that lived sixty million years ago. Their thoughts on their own extinction, like so many other mysteries, they took with them.

Fact: Dinosaurs still exist. Here's what they look like. A father and son in a failing used bookstore, spending long, aimless days consuming words no one around here buys anymore. The father, Ira, sits reading in his usual spot, a ripped upholstered chair, dented from years of use, in the maps section, next to the picture window that's not so picturesque anymore with its Harry Potter lightning-bolt crack running down the side of it. The son—that's me, Aaron—slumps on a stool by the starving cash register, obsessively reading about dinosaurs. The shelves in the store, once so tidy and neat, spill over, the books like soldiers in a long-lost war. We have more volumes now than we did when we were a functioning bookstore because whenever Ira sees a book in the garbage or recycling bin, or on the side of the road, he rescues it and brings it home. We are a store full of left-behinds.

The morning this tale begins, Ira and I are sitting in our usual spots, reading our usual books, when an ungodly moan shudders through the store. It sounds like a foghorn except we are in the Cascade mountains of Washington State, a hundred miles from the ocean or ships or foghorns.

Ira jumps up from his seat, eyes wide and panicky. "What was that?"

"I don't—" I'm drowned out by an ice-sharp crack, followed by the pitiful sounds of books avalanching onto the floor. One of our largest shelves has split down the middle, like the chestnut tree in *Jane Eyre*. And anyone who's read *Jane Eyre* knows what that portends.

Ira races over, kneeling down, despondent as he hovers over the fallen soldiers, as if he's the general who led them to their deaths. He's not. This is not his fault. None of it.

"I got this," I tell him in the whispery voice I've learned to use when he gets agitated. I lead him back to his chair, extract the weighted blanket, and lay it over him. I turn on the kettle we keep downstairs and brew him some chamomile tea.

"But the books . . ." Ira's voice is heavy with mourning, as if the books were living, breathing things. Which to him they are.

Ira believes books are miracles. "Twenty-six letters," he used to tell me as I sat on his lap, looking at picture books about sibling badgers or hungry caterpillars while he read some biography of LBJ or a volume of poetry by Matthea Harvey. "Twenty-six letters and some punctuation marks and you have infinite words in infinite worlds." He'd gesture at my book, at his book, at all the books in the shop. "How is that not a miracle?"

"Don't worry," I tell Ira now, walking over to clear up the mess on the floor. "The books will be fine."

The books will not be fine. Even they seem to get that, splayed out, pages open, spines cracked, dust jackets hanging off, their fresh paper smell, their relevance, their dignity, gone. I flip through an

old Tuscany travel guide from the floor, pausing on a listing for an Italian pension that probably got killed by Airbnb. Then I pick up a cookbook, uncrease the almost pornographic picture of a cheese soufflé recipe no one will look at now that they can log onto Epicurious. The books are orphans, but they are our orphans, and so I stack them gently in a corner with the tenderness they deserve.

Unlike my brother Sandy, who never gave two shits about books but conquered his first early reader before he even started kindergarten, I, who desperately wanted the keys to Ira's castle, had a hard time learning to read. The words danced across the page and I could never remember the various rules about how an *E* at the end makes the vowel say its own name. The teachers would have meetings with Ira and Mom about delays and interventions. Mom was worried but Ira was not. "It'll happen when it happens." But every day that it didn't happen, I felt like I was being denied a miracle.

Toward the end of third grade, I picked up a book from the bins at school, not one of the annoying just-right baby books that got sent home in my backpack, but a hardcover novel with an illustration of a majestic and kindly lion that seemed to be beckoning to me. I opened the first page and read the line: *Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy*. And with that, my world changed.

Ira had been reading to me since before I was born, but that was not remotely comparable to reading on my own, the way that being a passenger in a car is nothing like being the driver. I've been driving ever since, from Narnia to Hogwarts to Middle-earth,

from Nigeria to Tasmania to the northern lights of Norway. All those worlds, in twenty-six letters. If anything, I'd thought, Ira had undersold the miracle.

But no more. These days, the only book I can stomach is *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs*. Other than that, I can't even look at a book without thinking about all that we've lost, and all we are still going to lose. Maybe this is why at night, in the quiet of my bedroom, I fantasize about the store going up in flames. I itch to hear that *foof* of the paper igniting. I imagine the heat of the blaze as our books, our clothes, our memories are incinerated. Sandy's records melt into a river of vinyl. When the fire is over, the vinyl will solidify, capturing in it bits and pieces of our lives. Fossils that future generations will study, trying to understand the people who lived here once, and how they went extinct.

"What about the shelf?" Ira asks now.

The shelf is ruined. Consider this a metaphor for the store. Our lives. But Ira's brow is furrowed in worry, as if the broken shelf physically pains him. Which it probably does. And when something pains Ira, it pains me too. Which I why I tell him we'll get a new shelf.

And so it begins.

The next morning, Ira wakes me with a series of gentle shakes. "Aaron," he says, a manic gleam in his hazel eyes, "you said we'd go buy a new shelf."

Did I? It's still dark outside. My head is full of cotton balls.

"C'mon!" Ira urges.

I blink until the digital clock comes into focus. It's 5:12. "Now?"

"Well, we have to drive to Seattle and back and if we leave at six, even if we hit traffic, we'll be there by eight when Coleman's opens and we can be done by eight thirty and there won't be traffic heading north, so we can be back by ten."

According to the laminated sign on the door Mom made a lifetime ago, Bluebird Books is open from ten to six, Monday through Saturday, closed Sundays. Ira insists on abiding by our posted times, even on snow days, even on sick days. It's part of what he calls the bookseller covenant. The fact that no one ever comes into the store before noon, if they come in at all, does not seem to play into his logic.

"Can't we get shelves in Bellingham?" I'm still not fully awake, which is why I add, "At the Home Depot?" even though I know Ira does not shop at Home Depot. Or Costco. Or Amazon. Ira remains committed to the small, independent store. A dinosaur who supports other dinosaurs.

"Absolutely not!" Ira says. "We have always shopped at Coleman's. Your mother and I bought our first bookshelf from Linda and Steve. Now come on!" He yanks away the covers. "Let's get moving."

Twenty minutes later, we are firing up the Volvo wagon and pulling out of the driveway. It's still midnight dark, dawn feeling very far away. At this hour, the businesses are all shuttered, so you can't tell which ones are kaput—like Dress You Up, which

still has its dusty mannequins in the window—and which are just closed.

Ira slows to wave to Penny Macklemore as she unlocks the hardware store, one of many businesses in town she owns. "Good morning, Penny!" He unrolls his window, showering us both with a blast of Northwest air, whose dampness makes it feel far colder than it actually is. "You're up early."

"Oh, I'm always up this early," Penny replies. "That's why I catch all the worms."

"Well, we're off to buy some new shelves," Ira replies. "See you later."

We drive toward the interstate, down the winding road, past the mills that used to employ half our town and now stand empty, partially reclaimed by the forests they once transformed into paper.

"Your mom and I bought all our furniture from Coleman's," Ira says as he merges onto the interstate. "It's run by a husband and wife. Well, it was until Steve died. Now Linda runs it with her daughter." Ira pauses. "Kind of like you and me."

"Right," I say, wondering if Linda Coleman's daughter also has fantasies about her store going up in flames. Wood, after all, is as flammable as paper.

"No matter how long it's been," Ira continues, "Linda always remembers the last thing we bought. 'Ira,' she'll say. 'How's that display table working out?' Even if it's been years."

What Ira is talking about is the hand-sell. He is a big believer in the hand-sell. Once upon a time, he and Mom were very good

at it. Before the asteroid came and ruined the business and frayed his brain, Ira had an almost photographic memory of what any given customer had read last, and therefore an uncanny ability to suggest what they should read next. So for instance, if Kayla Stoddard came in, stopping to chat with Mom about the brand-new coat (with tags on) Kayla had scored at the Goodwill, Ira would remember that the last two books Kayla had bought were *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, and would surmise, correctly, that she was on Poirot kick and would quietly have *Appointment with Death* ready for her. He and Mom used to sell a lot of books this way.

"Linda will find us a good replacement for the broken shelf," Ira says as a gasoline tanker tears past the Volvo on the uphill. "And then we can organize a bit here and there and turn things around."

Ira often talks about *turning things around*. But what he really means is turning back time, to before the asteroid hit. And though I've read a fair number of books about the theoretical possibility of time travel, as far as I know, no one has invented a time machine yet. Still, I don't blame him for wishing.

When we pull into Coleman's, right at eight, the store is dark and locked. I run out to check the sign on the door. "It says it opens at nine," I call to Ira.

"That's odd." Ira scratches his beard. "I could've sworn it was open from eight to four. Linda arranged the schedule like that so they could be home with the kids in the evening. Though the daughter, Lisa is her name," Ira says, snapping his fingers

at the synaptic connection, "she's grown now, so maybe they changed the hours. Now we're going to open late."

He frowns, as if there will be people waiting eagerly at our doorstep the way we are waiting at Coleman's.

"Well, since we have time to kill, do you want to get some breakfast?" I ask.

"Sure," Ira agrees.

We get back in the car and drive toward a shopping center. On one end of the parking lot is one of those giant health food emporiums. On the other side is a bookstore. Its windows are jammed with artful displays of new titles, smiling author photos advertising upcoming readings, a calendar of events. All signs of a bookshop thriving—in Amazon's backyard, no less—having survived algorithms, pandemics, TikTok. A reminder that not all species went extinct after the asteroid hit. Just the dinosaurs.

The sight of the store deflates Ira, who slumps in his seat and refuses to get out of the car. "Just go grab me something."

The health food store is decked out for Halloween: gourds and pumpkins and artisanal candy with "real sugar" because apparently that's a selling point. The prepared-food area is like a museum: fresh-cut fruit symmetrically laid out, a buffet of scrambled eggs and fluffy biscuits warming under a heat lamp. Ten dollars a pound. The egg breakfast at C.J.'s is five bucks, including juice and coffee.

I set off for something more affordable. And it's there, between kombucha scobies and shade-grown coffee, I see it: a table with records for sale. The cheapest one is twenty bucks. They go up, significantly, from there.

A tattooed hipster mans the table. He wears a fedora with a feather in it. I can't tell if it's a Halloween costume or just his "ironic" style.

"You collect vinyl?" he asks.

"Me? No!" I tell him. "I don't like records, or CDs, or music, for that matter."

The hipster rears back as if I just informed him that I mutilate kittens for fun. "What kind of person doesn't like music?"

My reply is automatic, an age-old distinction I don't even question: "A book person."

Around eight forty-five, bellies full of on-sale granola bars, we pull back into the Coleman's parking lot just as a guy wearing a red vest is unlocking the metal gate. "Hello," Ira calls, leaping out of the car. "Are you open?"

"We open at nine."

"Could we come in now?" Ira replies. "I'm an old friend of Linda's."

"Who's Linda?"

"Linda Coleman. Owner since nineteen seventy . . ." Ira points to the sign, the words dying in his mouth as he sees the placard beneath the Coleman's sign that reads UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.

"Oh, yeah, they sold the store," the guy tells us.

"To your family?" Ira asks unsteadily.

"To Furniture Emporium," he replies.

"Does your family own that?" Ira asks.

"No, it's the chain. They kept the name, though, because people know this place. But it's really a Furniture Emporium now."

"Oh," Ira says. "I see."

The clerk is friendly enough. After he unlocks the door and flips on the lights, he says, "You can come in early." He opens the door. "Browse if you want."

Set loose, Ira is adrift. He jogs up and down the aisles, swiveling left and right like a lost child in the grocery store.

"How about this one?" I ask, pointing to an oak shelf that looks vaguely like the one that broke, in that it is large, wooden, and reddish.

"Okay, okay, good, good," Ira says, speaking in duplicate as he does when his anxiety spikes. "How much?"

I peer at the price sticker. "On sale for four hundred and forty-five dollars."

I have no idea if that's a lot for a shelf. Or if we can afford it. Though I technically own the bookstore, Ira still takes care of the business end of things.

"We'd like the red oak shelf," Ira calls to the clerk. "Delivered."

They start filling out the paperwork. When Ira gives our address, the clerk is not familiar with our town. I show him on my phone. "Oh, man, that's far."

"Linda always delivered for us. Steve used to drive the truck himself. Charged fifty dollars."

"Delivery that far is gonna be . . ." He types into the computer. "One fifty." He looks at Ira. "You'd be better off buying it online. Get free shipping."

Online? You're better off telling Ira to sell his kidney. Which he wouldn't. Give it away? Yes, but not sell it.

"Ira," I try. "He has a point."

"I won't buy online. From a chain."

"But this *is* a chain."

"But this is where I've always bought my furniture." He nods to the clerk, who tallies up the total.

"Four forty-five, plus tax and delivery. That comes to six thirty-four."

"Six thirty-four," Ira repeats in a reedy voice.

"Maybe we should forget it," I begin.

"No," Ira says. "We need a shelf." With a shaking hand, Ira counts the bills in his wallet. "I have two hundred in cash. Charge the rest," he says, pulling out a credit card.

"Where'd you get that card?"

"Oh, I've had this one for years," he replies.

Before I can point out that he must know I know this is bullshit, the card is declined. "Try this one," Ira says, forking over another one.

"How are you getting all these cards?" When Ira and Mom transferred ownership of the store to me on my eighteenth birthday and then declared bankruptcy a few months later, it was supposed to wipe out the debt than had been sinking us. And it was also meant to wipe their credit clean. Ira's not meant to be eligible for new cards.

"They're in my name," Ira replies, his breath growing ragged as he hands over yet another card. "They won't hurt the store. They won't hurt you."

"*They?* How many cards do you have?"

"Just three."

"*Just* three?"

"It's not a big deal. Sometimes you have to borrow from Peter to pay Paul."

When the third card is declined, Ira bows his head. "Linda used to let me pay on installments," he tells the clerk.

"Sure," the clerk says. "We can do that."

Ira looks up, a painful smile on his face. "Thank you. Is it okay if we pay two hundred now?"

"Yep," the clerk replies. "The balance is due before we deliver. We'll hold it for ninety days."

Ira blinks. His mouth goes into an O shape, like a fish gasping for air.

"Ira, he means layaway. Not credit. You have to pay before you get the shelf."

"O-oh," Ira stutters. His breathing picks up and his eyes bulge. I know what's coming next.

"Excuse us a moment." I lead Ira to a bench outside and help him to take deep, slow breaths. "Let's just forget the shelves."

"No!" Ira's voice is raspy, desperate. "We can't."

"Fine. Then let's order online."

"No!" Ira hands me his wallet. "Just go get something."

"But Ira . . ." I begin, the frustration twisting in my stomach. Because sometimes I just want to shake him. Why can't he see it? A shelf won't magically transform us into a bookstore like the one in this shopping center. It's over for us. Time to accept our extinction. Like Linda Coleman apparently has.

But then I look at him: this broken man, who has given me, all of us, all of him.

"Fine," I say, closing my fist around the wallet. I go back inside and slap two hundred dollars out on the counter. "What will this get us?"

What it will get us is metal shelves.

This turns out to be important.

Too Loud a Solitude

The next morning, Ira drops a stack of books on the counter beside me and announces, "First of November. Time to begin a new unit."

"Great," I say, forcing a smile. "What do we have this month?"

"Central Europeans. Communism and kinky sex."

"Sounds fascinating."

In case it's not been made abundantly clear, I was the nerdy book kid growing up, which in our town was like having leprosy. Luckily, there were a handful of other lepers in town, smart, brainy people who didn't regard reading a book as a sign of sexual impotence. They've all left, obviously. Off to college, like I was meant to be. But senior year, we were in the middle of a messy bankruptcy and property transfer, which made applying for financial aid impossible. So I figured I'd take a year, apply again when things were settled.

A lot can change in a year, though. Just ask the dinosaurs. By the time college applications came due again, Sandy was gone. Mom was gone. And Ira, though still physically here, was also gone. Leaving was an impossibility. And besides, by then I owned a bookstore. Job security for life, Ira told me without a speck of irony.

Ira, who had been halfway through a PhD program when he fell in love with Mom and dropped out, insisted I continue my education, college or not. So I now attend the University of Ira. It's an unaccredited school, and offers only one major, but you can't beat the tuition and the professor's so distracted most of the time, he barely notices that his student isn't reading all of the books. Or any of them.

"This is one of my favorites," Ira says, tapping a book on top of the pile called *Too Loud a Solitude* by Bohumil Hrabal.

"What's it about?"

"A garbage collector who rescues books from dumps."

"So, basically, your memoir."

"Ha, ha. It's slim but packs a punch. I think you'll like it."

"Can't wait."

Ira stands there, watching, so I open the book. *For thirty-five years now I've been in wastepaper, and it's my love story*, it begins. The font is tiny and the words skitter across the page the way they did when I was learning to read.

"Good, huh?" Ira is so genuinely excited to share another miracle with me that it makes me feel all the shittier when I reply with a completely insincere: "Tremendous."

Satisfied that I'm fully hooked, Ira returns to his corner and picks up his book. Once he's engrossed in his, I put mine down. I will never read it. I'll peruse some reviews and pull out some quotes and bullshit well enough to make Ira think I have. Two years ago, he would have seen right through me. But if a lot can change in one year, the world can end in two.

Bluebird Books once had a small but devoted group of regulars. These days, we have two. Grover, our mail carrier and Penny Macklemore, who stops in about once a week.

"Good afternoon," Penny drawls. "And how are we today?" She speaks in the cadence of a kindergarten teacher and wears a sweatshirt emblazoned with slogans like PROFESSIONAL GRANDMOTHER. But don't be fooled. Penny is a shark with blue-tinted hair that she has set twice a week at the only salon in town, which she happens to own. She also owns the hardware store, the liquor store, the ValuMart, and the used car dealership, where her late husband worked for forty years.

"Doing well, Penny," Ira replies. "And how are you?"

"Fine, fine." Penny stumbles over the pile of fallen books teetering next to the split shelf. "Didn't you say you were getting a new shelf yesterday?"

Yesterday. It feels like ten years ago already. By the time we got home, Ira and I were both so dispirited it was all we could do to drag the flat-pack box to the basement. "Just need to set the shelf up," Ira says.

"Well, do it soon," Penny replies. "This place is a lawsuit waiting to happen."

"Who's going to sue me? You?" He laughs, like it's a joke, and Penny laughs along too. Though I wouldn't put it past her. Penny has made no secret of her desire to own a building on Main Street, a jewel in her small-town *Monopoly* crown. She's also made no

secret that she'd like our store to be that jewel. We are smack-dab between C.J.'s Diner and Jimmy's Tavern, prime real estate Penny says is wasted on a bookstore. "I mean, does anybody read anymore?" she asks.

"Storytelling is as old as language, so presumably yes," Ira replies when she poses that question again today.

"Well, if it's stories you're after," Penny drawls, "Netflix has sixteen seasons of *Grey's Anatomy*."

Ira starts to lecture Penny about the primacy of the printed word. Of the particular transportive experience of ink on paper. How, when you watch, you are a spectator, but when you read, you're a participant. "Can *Grey's Anatomy* do that?" he asks, with the authority of someone who has never seen a single episode of that show.

"If you ask me," Penny says, "what people want . . . no, what they *deserve*"—she points out the window to a few such people: a grizzled group of out-of-work lumberjacks on their daily pilgrimage from C.J.'s, where they spend the first half of their day, to Jimmy's, where they spend the second half—"is something useful."

"Every town deserves a bookstore and nothing is more useful than reading." Ira gestures to a fading poster of Frederick Douglass that promises *Once you learn to read, you will be forever free*.

"People learn to read at school, Ira," Penny says. "And this is America. We're already free."

"So I'm told," Ira muses.

Penny gathers up her things. She's halfway out the door when she stops, turns around, and, in a voice that sounds almost sympathetic, says, "Ira, I know you think every town deserves

a bookstore, but you ever consider that not every town actually wants one?"

Ira sighs. "Every day of my life."

Our second visitor comes in a couple hours later. Grover used to deliver us boxes of books, copies of *Publishers Weekly* Mom would pore over, thick catalogs full of the next season's offerings that I'd always crack before anyone else, inhaling the papery scent, tabbing books I thought looked good. Back then, Grover would linger, leaning against the porch swing with Mom, gossiping—between the two of them, they knew everything: who'd gotten engaged, who'd been arrested, who was pregnant. These days, he drops the mail like a hot potato, apologizes that he's late, and gets the hell out.

"Anything good?" I ask as Ira leafs through the mail.

"Just junk," he says, dropping everything into the recycling bin. "How's the Hrabal?"

"Great," I reply, even though I have not made it past page four.

After Ira settles back into his easy chair, I stealthily pull today's "junk," and all the rest of the junk beneath it, from the recycling bin and bring it back to the counter to take a look. There are several credit card statements. The first one is maxed-out, with a balance of more than $2,700. I open another one, also at its limit. Same with the third. All three are snowballing astronomical interest charges because Ira has only been making the minimum payments.

My throat closes and I taste them: strawberries, sweet and rotting

and right on my tongue even though it's been years since I ate one. I used to gobble them up by the basket, but when I was twelve I popped one in my mouth and my throat went scratchy. I popped in another, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. I was rushed to the ER in anaphylactic shock. It turned out I'd developed what's called a latent allergy. "What a shame," Mom said. "He loves strawberries." To which the doctor had replied, "Unfortunately, sometimes the things we love can also kill us."

No fucking kidding.

I open an IRS notice next; it's in my name, threatening a penalty because apparently I have not filed a tax return. The bank statement brings more bad news: a balance decidedly low on digits. I look at Ira, calmly licking his finger as he turns the page, as if we were not at this very moment on the precipice of financial ruin.

How could he have let this happen? No, that's not fair. I know how Ira let it happen. The question is: How did I?

I gather the bills and shove them in my waistband. Only when the bell over the door rings does Ira look up. "Heading out?"

"Yeah. To see a friend."

Had Ira been paying a mote of attention, he would have known this was bullshit. I no longer have friends. The ones I once had are at college, and when they come back, if they come back, they don't call me. I can't really blame them. We'd always joked it was easy to separate the winners and losers in our town because there were no winners over the age of eighteen. By staying, I guess I joined team loser. The tragic irony of this is that to the people in our town, I've always been team loser.

I jog down Main Street, passing Jimmy's as the lumberjacks

spill out at five, which is when happy hour ends. I turn left on Alder, the only other commercial street downtown, which is where our accountant, Dexter Collings, has his office.

"Aaron," he says as I pound on the door. "I was just closing up."

I thrust the papers at Dexter, breathing hard.

"What's this?" he asks.

"More debt," I reply. "How? Wasn't the bankruptcy meant to wipe that out? And how did Ira get these credit cards?"

Dexter gestures for me to come into his office, which is a little like stepping into a Texas rodeo hall of fame, even though Dexter was born in Bellingham. There's a longhorn bracketed to the wall, a row of cowboy hats on hooks, a bronze statue of a rider with a lasso. He sits down into his big tufted leather chair and thumbs through the bills, humming as he goes.

"What?"

"The hospital bill appears to come from after the bankruptcy, so it was not included in the settlement."

"So we owe that money?"

He nods as he lays that bill down.

"And the tax return?"

"I told your father he had to file. I guess it got away from him." He flips through the credit card statements. "Hmm."

"What?"

"These appear to be recent. It's been a year, so your father was able to apply for new cards. They all have low maximums, at least." He squints at the fine print and whistles. "And high interest rates." He pulls out a bank statement. "How's your cash flow?"

"More like a cash puddle."

"Are you making enough each month to cover expenses?"

I shrug. "We don't sell much of anything in the store but Ira says he's been selling off his rare books collection." I try to remember the last time Ira had a shipment for Grover. I can't recall one.

"See this?" Dexter asks, pointing to a deposit on the bank statement for $800, and a charge on the credit card for the same amount. "It looks to me like Ira has been taking cash out of the cards to cover the business expenses."

Oh, Ira.

"This is not sustainable," Dexter adds, as if this is not abundantly obvious.

"What do I do?"

"Find a way to increase your income."

"Trust me, we're trying. Can I get another loan or something? To cover us? Borrow from Peter to pay Paul?"

"The property's pretty leveraged," Dexter says, leafing through the papers, "and because of that, and your age, you're going to have a hard time accessing credit even with the store as collateral."

"Speak English, Dex. I don't know what that means."

"It means you can't borrow from Peter to pay Paul when Peter's broke too. And even if you could . . ." He shuffles the papers together and hands them back. "You'd just be delaying." He trails off. Dex is a nice enough man. He doesn't want to tell me we are dinosaurs, post-asteroid. But I already know that.

"The inevitable?" I finish.

Dexter nods. "I'm sorry."

Sometimes a Great Notion

The store's closed when I get back from Dexter's, so I quietly let myself in. I wander over to the case where Ira's rare collection is housed. It's locked, but he keeps the key in one of the cubby drawers. When I open the door, the shelves are empty.

The starchy odor of pasta cooking upstairs wafts down, but instead of heading up to the apartment, I unlock the basement, flick on the fluorescent lights, and descend the splintering, rickety stairs.

The basement is split in two. The chaotic side of the room contains the messy Mom Jumble: a dozen haphazardly packed boxes of all the stuff she left behind. The sleeve of the rainbow bathrobe we used to call Joseph sticks out of one box. Her Mr. Coffee out of another. The collection of books on addiction she and Ira read together—maybe the one time when books failed him—sits in a crate in the corner next to Mom's ancient Schwinn.

Ira has offered to ship her some of her stuff, but she says she moves around too much. This is true, but I don't think that's the reason. When she left, it was like she needed to amputate herself from every shred of what had been our life. Her clothes, her books, her bike.

Ira.

Me.

The other side of the basement is neat and spartan. On the wall hang a dozen pine bins, locked. The one and only key is in my pocket.

Mom used to say that money problems are really math problems. Rehab stint number one: Sandy's college savings. Wilderness program: a second mortgage on the store. Rehab stint number two: my college savings.

I wonder if Sandy operated by a similar logic: ten bags of heroin, Mom's SLR camera. Twenty tabs of oxy, my laptop computer. A handful of fentanyl patches, Ira's prized signed first edition of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*.

I pull the key out of my pocket and open the first bin, which is alphabetically the last, *X–Z*: *X*, X Ambassadors, X-Ray Spex, XTC. And so on. According to the laminated index nailed to the inside of the door, there are 167 pieces of vinyl in this bin alone, a fraction of Sandy's collection.

I open the other eleven bins, one by one. I run my hand across the top of outer plastic sleeves, sharp, meticulously straight, like a military formation. This is his legacy, the one thing Sandy refused to destroy, the thing he loved more than any of us.

Find a way to increase your income, Dexter said.

There are 2,326 records down here.

Money problems are just math problems, Mom said. I lock the bins and shove the one and only key back in my pocket.

You gotta promise me, Sandy said.

The three voice clash in my head as I climb back to the ash heap of our store. This is my brother's true legacy.

But can I do it?

I ask myself this as I sit across from Ira, eating spaghetti from a box with sauce from a jar and parmesan cheese that tastes like sawdust. Can I sell of some Sandy's records to get out of the crater he created? After what he did. After what I did.

"How are your friends?" Ira asks.

It takes me a second to remember Ira thinks I was chilling with friends this afternoon as opposed to hanging out with a CPA.

"Good, good," I lie.

I'll find a music club, the kind full of people like Sandy. I won't sell all of them. Just enough to cover the mortgage payment for a few months, get us back on our feet. A few hundred. He'd barely notice.

(He would totally notice.)

"In fact," I tell Ira, the idea taking root because I guess I *can* do it, "I'm going out with them tonight. If it's okay to take the car."

"Oh, that's nice," he says, even though it's November 2 and even if I still had friends, none would be home on break now.

But that's what Ira does. Trusts people. It's his downfall.

The nearest musical venue is a club called the Outhouse, though it's a "club" like the coffee served at C.J.'s is "fine Italian roast." (It's Folgers. I've seen the cans.) It's basically a converted garage with

a bare-bones bar and some fold-up plastic tables for merch sales.

I get there and case the joint, pay my cover, then come back to the Volvo, lift the hatch, pull out a crate, and set it on the curb. I can't bring it inside. It weighs a ton. But what am I supposed to do? Announce "Vinyl for sale" like the salesman in *Caps for Sale*, the first book Ira says he ever read to me (in utero, the day Mom's pregnancy test came back positive)? Do I flash my goods, like those guys in movies who hide a trove's worth of stolen jewels in their trench coats? Given it's mostly women hanging outside the club, I'm not sure how well that would go down. Do women even collect records, or is it more of a guy thing? Like serial killing.

If Sandy were here, he'd know exactly what to do. He had Ira's memory for things like printings and value. Not to mention his radar. We'd be driving and he'd shout to stop the car at a particular yard sale, even though it looked like the dozens of similar ones we'd just passed. But Sandy somehow knew that at this sale, behind the rusted lawnmower, would be a box of records, and in that box, amid the Andrea Bocellis and Barry Manilows, a rare ten-inch bootleg of the Who. From inside the club, I hear the feedbacky blare of guitar. My head starts to throb. What was I thinking? I *can't* do this. For so many reasons. I open the hatch, replace the crate, and lay the blanket on top of it.

"Hey, I know you."

I turn around but don't see anyone.

"Down here, dawg."

And that's when I see Chad Santos. Chad was a couple grades ahead of me in school, one of those beery, cheery snowboarder bros who went around high-fiving and saying things like, "Just

living my best life." A few years ago, Chad flew off a cliff while snowboarding, broke his back, and wound up in a wheelchair. Not living his best life anymore, is he?

"You here to see Beethoven's Anvil?" Chad asks.

"The what now?"

"Beethoven's Anvil." Chad grins. "I've never seen any other guy from our town at one of their gigs."

"Oh, I'm not here to see them." I try to close the hatch, but Chad has angled himself in the way. "Sorry, do you mind?"

Chad peers into the Volvo. "What you got there?"

"Nothing."

Chad reaches in and pulls off the blanket. "Those records?"

"No."

"They look like records."

"I mean, they are. But they're not mine."

"Are they Sandy's?"

At the mention of my brother's name, my heart ricochets, as if someone has reached into my chest and yanked it.

"You are Sandy's brother, right?" Chad asks. "Sorry, I don't remember your name."

When I don't answer, Chad sticks out his hand. He's wearing high-tech fingerless gloves, fraying at the seams. "I'm Chad."

"I'm Aaron," I manage.

"Aaron, right. Man, I can't remember the last time I saw you."

I can. Junior year. I was walking home from school with Susanna Dyerson. We'd bonded over our mutual love of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and our literary talks had progressed to makeout sessions in the woods, which was where we were

headed when Chad and his bros drove by, pelting me with empty beer cans. It was, as things went back then, a minor humiliation. Except then Susanna suddenly remembered she had to go home and after that she just wanted us to be friends.

"Always a pleasure catching up with you, Chad." There's enough sarcasm in my voice to peel the enamel off my teeth, but Chad doesn't seem to notice. He just grins and bobs his head and refuses to get out of the way.

"So if you're not here for Beethoven's Anvil, tell me you're not here for the Silk Stranglers?" He shakes his head in profound disappointment. "They're trash."

"I'm not here to see Silk Strangers or the Beethoven's Hammer."

"Anvil," Chad corrects.

"Them either."

He cocks his head to the side. "Then what are you doing here?"

"Leaving." I close the hatch and pull my keys out from my pocket, maneuvering around Chad. "Good seeing you," I lie. "Take care."

"Hold up, dawg." Chad wheels after me. "Why don't you stick around? Beethoven's Anvil is high-key cool. And tell you what, if you don't like them, I'll pay you back your cover charge." I step to the right, unsure why Chad is being so insistent, except maybe to prank me. Chad angles his chair to his left, blocking my way. "You're gonna love them."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you're Sandy's brother, aren't you?"

I was. But not anymore. And never like that.

"See you around, Chad." I push past him, forcefully, and get

into the car. When I drive away, he's still on the pavement. I watch him grow smaller in the rearview mirror.

When I get home, I can't bring myself to stop. When I was younger Sandy told me that the books came to life at night. He meant to frighten me, but I was enthralled by the idea. It's only now that I'm older, and know it's not true, that it *does* scare me.

I keep going, down Main Street, past Jimmy's, all the way to the other side of town, to the used car lot. The inflatable balloon that dances manically all day is now slumped in a corner. I loop back on Oak Ridge Boulevard, the main commercial drag outside of downtown, where the ValuMart is. It too is dark, the carts tucked in for the night. I keep driving, not realizing where I'm going until I see the hardware store, a small light on in the back.

I park on the empty street and walk through the misty night. It's almost ten when I tap on the locked door, but Penny Macklemore answers right away, smiling, as if she's been expecting me all along.

The Rules

My parents met because of books. I exist because of books. Really.

Ira had discovered the miracle of twenty-six letters so precociously that when in sixth grade all the students had to stand up and claim what they wanted to do when they grew up, Ira announced he wanted to read. His teacher told him that wasn't a job, unless he wanted to become an English teacher, or perhaps a literature professor. Ira was halfway through a PhD program in comparative lit when he realized that a love of books did *not* equal a love of academia. He hated the politics in his department, the squabbling, the push to publish. He didn't want to publish. He wanted to read. Maybe his sixth-grade teacher had been right, and that wasn't a job.

Ira drove cross-country, hoping to figure out what he wanted to do. He stopped at every thrift store, every estate sale, every library sale he came across, collecting books all the way. By the time he'd reached the northwestern tip of Washington, he had about four hundred books—and no idea what to do with his life. He was on the verge of surrendering back to his program when he saw this woman hitchhiking by the side of the road.

By July, they were married. By September, they'd bought a

two-story building on the main street of a small mountain town, with an apartment upstairs and a retail space on the ground floor that they'd sell used books from—those four hundred volumes Ira had amassed would be the inaugural inventory. But right as they were about to open, Mom thought maybe they ought to know a bit more about what they were doing, so she went to what would be the first of many trade shows. That year, all anyone could talk about was a book called *The Rules*, a sort of retro dating guide that instructed single women how to land a man by essentially hiding all their less-desirable traits until there was a ring on the finger and it was presumably too late to turn back. Mom had a hunch and ordered twenty copies, which sold out almost immediately.

Mom used to joke that she pulled a Rules on Ira, luring him into opening a used bookstore full of dusty classics he could collect, only to make him sell contemporary hits like *The Rules* and *Twilight*. But as long as Mom handled all the new books and chatted up the customers, Ira was happy to continue collecting the rare editions and be the human algorithm.

"Yin and Yang," was how Mom put it.

"Eros and Thanatos," was how Ira put it.

See?

For some reason, I'm thinking about *The Rules* a few nights later when I return from the signing at Penny's office. Probably because it's pouring rain, as it will continue to pour rain for the next six

to eight months. If anything, it was the Northwest weather that Rulesed Ira.

The year he met Mom had been one of those magical summers when the sun arrives early to the party in May and staggers home, the last to leave, halfway through October. By the time the weather showed its true colors—which is to say singular color, which is to say gray—it was November, and Bluebird Books was up and running. The ring was solidly on the finger.

Ira never loved the dark, gray winters, but after the asteroid, when Yin lost its Yang, when Thanatos went solo, they became unendurable. He's always cold now, even in summer. The wet gets into his bones. He complains of aching joints, suffers a constant hoarse cough. He sleeps in mittens and thick wool socks. And every night he soaks his feet in the bathtub, trying to get rid of the chill.

This is where I find him tonight, huddled on the ledge of the tub, wrapped in his old Pendleton blanket. When we get out of here, I will take us somewhere warm, where the sun hangs stubbornly in the sky no matter what the calendar dictates. I will reverse-Rules Ira. Trick him into moving somewhere where he will be warm, and if not happy, a little bit less sad.

"Ira, I need to tell you something," I say right as the landline starts to ring.

"Can you get that?" Ira calls. "It might be your mother."

Of course it's Mom. Who else calls on the landline anymore?

I decided not tell Ira what I was going to do before it was done. I wanted it to be too late to turn back. Now it is. And I have to tell him. "I need to speak to you. Now."

"Can you get the phone first?" We disconnected the answering machine, so the phone continues to ring. She knows we're home.

"It's important."

"Your mother is important." He says this with all sincerity, no bitterness. He believes we're still a family. Just a different kind of family.

"Fine," I grouse. I grab the extension from the kitchen, pick up with a sigh. "Hey, Mom."

"Aaron, my love . . ."

I've read stories about how grief or trauma changes people overnight. Black hair goes gray. Smooth skin goes wrinkled. With Mom, it was her voice. Always strong and clear, if unapologetically off-key when she sang, which was often. The woman on the other end of the line, however, sounds like an old lady, even though Mom's not yet fifty.

I hear dogs barking in the background. The dogs are new. Which means she's moved again.

"Where are you now?"

"Silver City, New Mexico, taking care of two dogs, five parakeets, and a pair of cats. The cats are feral, so I just leave them food."

That's what she does now, bounces from place to place, pet-sitting. The last time I talked to her, she was minding an epaulette shark in a giant three-hundred-gallon home aquarium in Orlando, Florida.

"How are you feeling, my love?" she asks.

Penny had a fancy fountain pen for me to sign with, but I

couldn't quite seem to get the angle right and there's a big ink spot on my thumb. I wipe it on my jeans, but it only smears. How I'm feeling is like Lady Macbeth.

"Good, good."

"And how are things in the store?"

"Same as always," I say, and though this is nearly always true—Ira's and my routine is unflaggingly, well, routine—tonight it's a blatant fiction.

There's an awkward pause. In the background, I can hear the birdsong.

"What are you reading these days?" Mom asks. In our family, this question is small talk, along the lines of *How's the weather?*

"Ira's reading West Indian authors and he has me on the Central Europeans."

"The writers with only consonants in their names?"

"Those are the ones. What's Silver City like?" I hear the glug of the tub draining, meaning Ira is almost done and I can get off the phone.

"The locals call it Silver. It's nice. A lot of sunshine."

Ira pads into the room, his feet bare, his toes long and finger-like, white with black hair. He gives me a kiss, his untamed beard tickling my neck. I hand him the phone without saying goodbye.

Her voice fills the air. She's still talking to me when Ira lifts the phone to his ear. "Hi, Annie. It's me now."

"When you get off, I need to speak to you," I tell Ira.

He nods. "Did you lock up downstairs?"

"Everything's taken care of."

He heads toward his bedroom, cradling the handset, tracking

wet footprints on the wood. Before he goes into his room, he turns back to me and says, "Thanks for being you."

This is what he always says to me. And normally I reply, courtesy of Oscar Wilde, "Everyone else was taken." It's our longstanding schtick, but tonight, knowing what I just did, I can't bear to say it.