

Sarah and Theo

AND IT'S NOTHING, really, or might be nothing, or ought to be nothing, as he leans his head forward to press the tip of his cigarette to the car's lighter. It sizzles on contact, a sound particular to its brief moment in history, in which cars have lighters and otherwise sensible fifteen-year-olds choke down Marlboro Reds and drive their mothers' Buicks without so much as a learner's permit. There's a girl he wants to impress. Her name is Misty Zimmerman, and if she lives through this night, she will grow up to be a magazine editor, or a high school teacher, or a defense lawyer. She will be a mother of three or remain childless. She will die young of ovarian cancer or live to know her great-grandchildren.

But these are only a few possible arcs to a life, a handful of shooting stars in the night sky. Change one thing and everything changes. A tremor here sets off an earthquake there. A fault line deepens. A wire gets tripped. His foot on the gas. He doesn't really know what he's doing, but that won't stop

him. He's all jacked up just like a fifteen-year-old boy. He has something to prove. To himself. To Misty. To his sister. It's as if he's following a script written in Braille, his fingers running across code he doesn't understand.

"Theo, slow down." That's his sister, Sarah, from the backseat.

Misty's riding shotgun.

It was Sarah who tossed him the keys to their mom's car. Sarah, age seventeen. After this night, she will become unknowable to him. The summer sky is a veil thrown over the moon and stars. The streets are quiet, the good people of Avalon long since tucked in for the night. Their own parents are asleep in their queen-size bed under the plaid afghan knitted by one of their father's patients. His mom is a deep sleeper, but his dad has been trained by a lifetime as a doctor to bolt awake at the slightest provocation. He is always ready.

The teenagers aren't looking for trouble. They're good kids—everyone would say so. But they're bored; it's the end of summer; school will resume next week. Sarah's going into her senior year, after which she'll be gone. She's a superstar, his sister. Varsity this, honors that. Bristling with potential. Theo has three years left, and he's barely made a mark. He's a chubby kid whose default is silence and shame. He blushes easily. He can feel his cheeks redden as he holds the lighter and inhales, hears the sizzle, draws smoke deep into his lungs. His father—a pulmonary surgeon—would kill him. Maybe that's why Sarah threw him the keys. Maybe she's trying to help—to get him to *act*, goddamnit. To take a risk. Better to be bad than to be nothing.

Misty Zimmerman is just a girl along for the ride. It was Sarah who asked her to come. Sarah, doing for Theo what Theo cannot do for himself. Change one thing and everything

changes. The Buick speeds down Poplar Street. Misty stretches and yawns in the passenger seat. Theo turns left, then right. He's getting the hang of this. He flicks the directional, then heads onto the parkway. As they pass the mall, he looks to see if Burger King is still open.

"Watch it!" Sarah yells.

He swerves back into his lane, heart racing. He almost hit the guardrail. He gets off the parkway at the next exit and eases up on the gas. This was maybe a bad idea. He wants to go home. He also wants another cigarette.

"Pull over," Sarah says. "I'll drive."

Theo looks for a good spot to stop. He has no idea how to park. Sarah's right—this is stupid.

"Actually no, forget it. I shouldn't," she says.

They're almost home. It's like a song in his head: *Almost home, almost home, almost home*. Just a few blocks to go. They pass the Hellers' house, the Chertoffs'.

As he leans forward, the lighter slips through Theo's fingers and drops into his open shirt collar. He lets out a yelp and tries to grab it, which only makes matters worse. He arches his back to shake the burning metal thing loose, but it's wedged between his shorts and his belly. The smell of singed flesh. A perfect shiny half-moon will remain. Years from now, when a lover traces the scar on his stomach and asks how he got it, he will roll away. But now—now their futures shoot like gamma rays from the moving car. Three high school students. What if Sarah had gone out with her friends instead, that night? What if Misty had begged off? What if Theo had succumbed to his usual way of being, and fixed himself a salami sandwich with lots of mustard and taken it with him to bed?

The wheel spins. The screams of teenagers in the night.

Theo no stop jesus fuck help god and there is no screech of brakes—nothing to blunt the impact. A concussion of metal and an ancient oak: the sound of two worlds colliding.

The fender and right side of the Buick crumple like it's a toy and this is all make-believe. Upstairs, on the second floor of Benjamin and Mimi Wilf's home, a light blinks on. A window opens. Ben Wilf stares down at the scene below for a fraction of a second. By the time he's made it to the front door, his daughter, Sarah, is standing before him—*thank god thank god thank god*—her tee shirt and her face splattered with blood. Theo is on all fours on the ground. He seems to be in one piece. *Thank god thank god thank god*. But then—
“There's a girl in the car, Dad—”

Misty Zimmerman is unconscious. She isn't wearing a seat belt—who wears seat belts?—and there's a gash in her forehead from which blood is gushing. There's no time to call an ambulance. If they wait for EMTs to get here, the girl will be gone. So Ben does what's necessary. He leans into the driver's door, hooks two hands beneath the girl's armpits, and drags her out.

“Your shirt, Theo!” he barks.

Theo's belly roils. He's about to be sick. He pulls his shirt off and throws it to his father. Ben lifts Misty's head, then wraps the shirt tightly around her skull in a tourniquet. His mind has gone slow and quiet. He's a very good doctor. He feels for the girl's pulse.

Mimi is on the front steps now, her nightgown billowing in the wind that seems to have kicked up out of nowhere.

“What happened?” Mimi screams. “Sarah? Theo?”

“It was me, Mom,” Sarah says. “I was driving.”

Theo stares at his sister.

“That doesn't matter now,” Ben says softly.

Up and down Division Street, their neighbors have awakened. The crash, the voices, the electricity in the air. Someone must have called it in. In the distance, the wail of a siren. Ben knows before he knows, in that deep instinctual way. He couldn't see in the dark when he dragged the girl out of the car. He registered only the head wound, the uncontrollable bleeding. He now knows: her neck is broken. And he has done the worst thing imaginable. He has moved her. In the days to come, he will tell the story to the authorities, to the life-support team, to Misty's parents. The story—that Sarah was driving, with Misty riding shotgun and Theo in the backseat—will not be questioned. Not this night, not ever. It will become the deepest kind of family secret, one so dangerous that it will never be spoken.

December 21, 2010

Benjamin

THE BOY IS at his window again. It is 10:45 at night, surely a time boys his age—he is nearing his eleventh birthday—should be asleep in their beds, dreaming their twitchy, colt-like dreams. But instead, like clockwork, here he is: dark hair glimmering in the light cast by the full moon, small hands grasping the windowsill, his thin neck craned upward through the open window, searching the sky. The boy's breath makes vaporous clouds in the cold. Now he picks up that gadget, pointing it this way and that like a compass, its eerie, milky-blue glow illuminating his pale face. What the hell is he doing? It's all Ben can do not to open his own window and yell across Division Street to the kid: *Be careful!* The words are in his throat.

Where are your parents?

But he can see the parents too, the entire house, except for the boy's room, lit up in the night like a love letter to Con Ed. The mother sits at the kitchen table, bent over a magazine, a wineglass near her elbow. The shape of the father can be

made out in the gym they built over the garage. The man is rowing like a maniac, as if propelling himself toward a drowning person.

The house across the street used to belong to the Platts, and before that, to the McCarthys. Back when he and Mimi had first moved into the neighborhood, when Division Street actually divided (though it was considered rude to talk about it) the more desirable part of town from the houses closer to the train station, there were no home gym additions, no pool houses like the one that seemed to spring up overnight behind the Berkelhammers' old house, no outdoor fireplaces and elaborate sound systems built into mossy stone walls.

A lone car slowly makes its way down Division and turns on Poplar. In the distance, the yowling of a cat. The stiff leaves from the holly bush scrape against the kitchen window downstairs. Ben had meant to ask the gardener to dig it up last fall before it rotted any more of the house's old clapboards, but with everything else going on, it had slipped his mind. Now, it's about to be somebody else's problem. The new owners, a couple he hasn't met, are relocating from Cleveland. Along with two small children. And one of those sad-eyed basset hounds.

So this is how he's going to spend this last night, then? Wrapped in his flannel robe, gazing out his bedroom window, absorbing every sight and sound of this place where he has lived more years than any other? He is committing it all to memory.

Forty years.

He and Mimi used to make fun of people who'd say treacly, asinine things like *it all goes by so fast*. But now, here he is. Forty years since he and Mimi moved into this house. Mimi was pregnant with Theo, and Sarah was in diapers.

They were probably not so very different from the Cleveland couple, imagining just how life would be. Downstairs, all the rooms are filled with boxes. These are stacked floor to ceiling and labeled according to destination:

S. W. for the china, Mimi's silver, most of the good linens. All to be shipped to Sarah in Santa Monica, though why she could possibly want more stuff than she already has is beyond him. His daughter has never been the sentimental type, but maybe now, in middle age, she is softening.

T. W. for the thousands of records—actual vinyl—for which Theo has purchased and restored a turntable in his Brooklyn loft. Also being shipped to Theo are boxes labeled *B. W. Files*, representing Ben's medical practice dating back to his residency. What else can he do with the files? Burn them? No. He will leave them in the care of his son.

The boy has spotted him. As he has for the last several nights, he raises his hand and waves—a child's wave, fluttering his fingers. Ben unlatches his window and slides it upward. The cold air hits him in the chest.

“Hey, kid!”

He knows the boy's name well. Waldo, a hard name to forget—but it feels too familiar to use it. Even though the family has lived across the street for a decade now, they've tended to keep to themselves. When they first moved in, Mimi never had a chance to walk over with her usual plate of cookies and a note welcoming them to the neighborhood. She used to keep copies of a list of helpful hints: the A&P on Grandview gets its fish fresh from Fulton Street; the second-grade teacher is a weak link, but Mrs. Hill, who teaches third, is a gem. Ben can see Mimi still, as she was during those years of what they now call parenting, as if describing an activity like jogging or hiking. Her wavy dark hair piled

into a messy knot. Her long legs tucked into ski boots. Her easy laugh.

These folks leave first thing in the morning, the father in a brand-new Lexus hybrid, the mother in a Prius—cars that don't make a sound—and as dusk falls they return, gliding silently into the garage, the automatic doors closing behind them. The boy doesn't play on the street the way Sarah and Theo used to. None of the neighborhood kids are ever out in their yards. They're carted around by their parents or nannies, lugging violins or cellos in their cases, dragging backpacks that weigh more than they do. They wear soccer uniforms or spanking white getups, their tiny waists wrapped in colorful karate or jujitsu belts.

"Hey, kid!" Ben calls again. "What are you doing?"

Young Waldo is holding the contraption—it looks to be a black book slightly larger than a paperback, but for the glow—up to the sky, as if suggesting that maybe God read him a bedtime story. Ben fumbles in his bathrobe pocket for his distance glasses. Now he can see the lettering on the boy's sweatshirt. A Red Sox fan. A surprise, here in Yankees territory. It can't be easy for him at school, then. Especially this year, when the *Red Sox suck!* chant has turned out to be all too true. The boy's long bangs fall over his eyes.

"Too bad about Pedroia," Ben calls out.

"*And Youkilis. And Ellsbury.*" The kid sounds personally aggrieved. His voice is unexpectedly high and musical, like a flute. Still, he keeps the black book trained on the sky.

"What is that thing?" Ben asks.

"Star Walk," the kid answers.

"Is that some kind of game?"

The kid flashes Ben a look—part disappointment, part incredulity—that he can read all the way across Division Street.

“No,” he says. “It’s not a game.”

“Okay, then.”

“Do you wanna see?”

“Well, I—”

Ben hesitates. Though he has kept an eye out for the boy over the years, he doesn’t know him, after all.

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

Through the kitchen window, the mother is silhouetted against the flickering lights of a television screen. The dad is still rowing.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

“I’m not tired.”

Waldo reminds Ben a bit of Theo at that age. Theo had been bigger, heftier, and when he couldn’t sleep he would pad down to the kitchen, slap some salami and dijon on a piece of bread, pour himself a glass of milk, as if only the weight of a full meal would settle him down for the night. Mimi would scold Theo, then, about not brushing his teeth, and would privately fret that maybe he was getting too heavy. Oh, how Ben wishes they had known then a fraction of what he knows now! That all those little worries (cavities! a few extra pounds of baby fat!) were nothing, in the scheme of things.

“I’ll meet you at the magic tree,” the boy calls. “In two minutes!” He ducks his head back inside and pulls down his window, disappearing into his darkened room.

Ben closes his eyes briefly. *The magic tree*. He knows that’s what this generation of neighborhood kids calls it. And why not? A majestic oak at the corner of Division and Birch (all the streets west of Division are named for trees), its trunk is now close to five feet in diameter. It is encircled—depending on the season—by dozens of varieties of wildflowers, tall, fragrant grasses. Every other bit of greenery in the neighborhood

is regularly manicured and trimmed by landscapers, but the oak presides over its own small patch of jungle, a primeval piece of real estate. People who don't know the story—newcomers to the neighborhood—surmise that the family who lives at 18 Division, Ben's house, must be responsible for the tree. They couldn't be more off the mark. But Ben won't set them straight.

He walks downstairs through the narrow passage left open by the floor-to-ceiling boxes lining either side of the front hall. Pulls his old down parka from the coatrack near the door and throws it over his bathrobe. What a sight he must be! An old man, stepping onto his front porch, wearing what appears to be a floor-length skirt, fuzzy moccasins, and a ratty ski jacket that has seen better days.

The boy is already waiting by the tree. Now, he too has the vantage point to see his mother pouring herself another glass of Chardonnay in their house across the street, his father rowing. But he is not watching the secret lives of his parents unfolding as if on a television screen. No, he's more interested in that thing, what was it called . . . that star thing. He is holding it open to the sky.

"Hi." Ben offers his hand. "We haven't formally met. I'm Dr. Wilf."

"I know," says the boy. Of course, he knows. Otherwise he wouldn't have left the safety of his house in the middle of the night to meet a perfect stranger. Would he? Ben feels a surge of protectiveness toward the kid. He wants to march across the street and knock on the front door. *It's eleven o'clock at night. Do you know where your son is?* The boy's face, up close, is beautiful in the way of all boys his age, his skin smooth and luminous. The fringes of his eyelashes are so long they cast shadows over his cheeks. His thin neck and

narrow shoulders. Ten going on eleven. A boy on the verge of enormous change. A boy (here he thinks of Theo with a pang) who is about to wade into a sea of unknowability from which it will take him years to return.

“I’m Waldo.”

“Hello, Waldo.”

Ben glances at the contraption. The screen seems to be mirroring the clear, moonlit sky. Stars shine against a purplish-black background. Strains of music emanate from the device—strange, otherworldly. Ben now sees that it’s one of those new, immensely desirable pieces of equipment, though he can’t remember what it’s called. He’s seen stories on the news of people lined up outside stores, standing all night just for the privilege of buying it before anybody else. He wonders if the kid’s father stood in line. From the intensity of his rowing, he strikes Ben, perhaps unfairly, as a man who might need to be first.

As Waldo tilts the screen, lines form, shapes emerge as if the heavens were opening up to them. A bull. A snake. A crab. A child holding a harp.

“Look at this.” Waldo slides his index finger down one side of the screen. The screen-stars wheel through the screen-sky, while above them, high above Division Street, a jet glides through the night. The lights on its wings blink steadily. It’s heading, most likely, to JFK. The actual stars seem curiously immobile, less compelling than the jet or the simulation of stars on Waldo’s screen.

“When’s your birthday?” Waldo asks abruptly.

“The sixteenth of January.”

“What year?”

“Are you asking how old I am?”

“No—that’s not the point!” The kid always seems on the

verge of extreme, near-explosive frustration, as if the world around him cannot—will not—conform to his expectations.

“Nineteen thirty-six,” Ben says. “January 16, 1936.”

“Around what time?”

Ben has to think about this. Does he even know? The last person who probably cared enough to remember the time of his birth was his own, long-gone mother. But then it comes to him.

“Close to nine at night.”

“And where?”

“New York City. Brooklyn, actually.”

The kid sets something in motion then, sets the galaxy spinning, and the date on the screen scrolls back, back, back at a dizzying pace. Although the ground is cold and damp, not quite yet frozen, and despite knowing that he will pay for it in his bones tomorrow, Ben sits down right between two of the oak tree’s tremendous roots. His scrawny, old-man legs peek out from his bathrobe, and he covers them with the soft plaid flannel. The boy kneels next to him in his Red Sox pajamas and ski jacket. The dates on the screen continue to spin, the shapes in the sky morphing, one into the next. He can hardly keep track. A bear. A lion. A sailboat.

Ben looks up Division Street at the few lights still on in houses whose occupants he no longer knows. He used to be able to tell you just about everything about the families who lived in these homes. For better or worse—for better *and* worse—he knew about Jimmy Platt’s little drug habit, Karen Russo’s affair with Ken the golf pro, the gambling problem that eventually forced the Gelfmans into foreclosure. He knew that Julie Heller regularly smoked a joint when she took her standard poodle for his late night walk, that Eric

Warner had gone to rehab, though no one had ever gotten to the bottom of why.

Theirs was a neighborhood like any other, with the secrets and heartaches and lies, the triumphs and moments of grace that weave their way through all communities. He had often felt stifled by it—and God knows, it had driven Mimi crazy—but still, he had taken some comfort from the fact that this was *his* neighborhood. *His* people. In making the decision to settle in a particular house on a particular street, they had all thrown their lot in with one another. Their kids had run in and out of one another's houses. Had smoked their first cigarettes together, been best friends, then sworn enemies, then friends again. The parents were like witnesses, bystanders, learning to get along (*for the kids' sake*, Mimi used to say) and sometimes even liking one another enough to go on joint vacations.

Now, the neighborhood has battened down its hatches for the night. Alarm systems on. Lipitor ingested, or Prozac, or Klonopin. Maybe, for a lucky few, Viagra. Couples, mostly men and women in their thirties and forties—nearly half his age—lie in bed together or apart, reading or drifting off while watching some nighttime medical drama. Babies, toddlers, schoolchildren, teenagers—all letting go of the day, surrendering to tomorrow.

All except Waldo.

“You’re seventy-four,” Waldo says.

“You did the math in your head.”

“Look.” Waldo hands Ben the device, which is heavier than it looks. “There it is.”

It takes Ben a few seconds to realize what he’s looking at: the sky of his birth. “Canis Major,” Waldo says. “A very cool constellation. Canis Major contains Sirius—the Dog Star. The brightest star in the night sky.”

Ben touches the screen, tracing the dog with his index finger: a large-pawed animal, seated, his head alert, as if awaiting further instructions. Waldo leans over and taps a circle in the upper-left corner of the screen.

“Canis Major is a constellation, included in the second-century astronomer P . . . Ptol . . . Ptolemy’s forty-eight constellations,” Waldo reads out loud, “and still included among the eighty-eight modern constellations. Its name is Latin for ‘greater dog,’ and it is commonly rep . . . rep . . .”

“Represented,” Ben prods the boy.

“I know!”

“Sorry.”

“. . . *represented* as one of the dogs following Orion, the hunter. See also Canis Minor, the ‘lesser dog.’”

“I’d certainly rather be born under a greater dog than a lesser dog,” Ben says.

Waldo glares at him.

“You’re making fun of me.”

“No.”

“You’re joking, then.”

“Well, yes.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

In the glow cast by the contraption, Ben sees that Waldo’s eyes are brimming with tears.

“Okay, buddy.” Ben pats his hand awkwardly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Everybody thinks this is stupid, or something.”

The boy is trying hard not to cry, but his sharp little chin is quivering.

“Who’s ‘everybody’?” Ben asks.

“I dunno.”

“C’mon.”