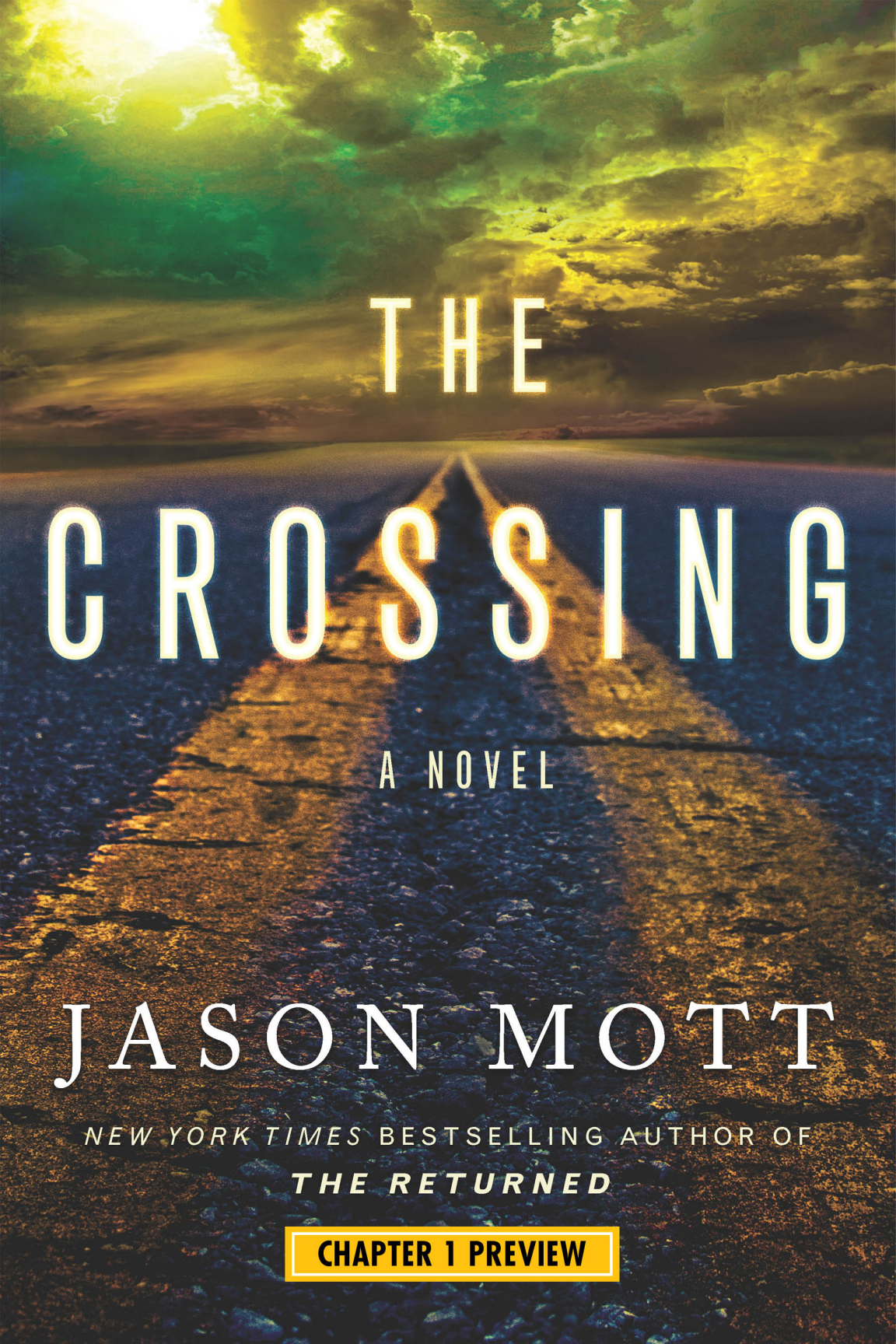
THE
CROSSING
A NOVEL
JASON MOTT
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE RETURNED
CHAPTER 1 PREVIEW

THE CROSSING

A NOVEL

JASON MOTT

LAUNCH

THE WHOLE WORLD was dying but still everyone made time for one last war. The Disease had entered its tenth year and the war had entered its fifth and there didn't seem to be any cure in sight for either of them. Some people said that because of the nature of The Disease, the older generation, seeing that their end was finally near, decided to settle all the old scores. One final global bar fight before last call.

The world had already lost twenty percent of its population by the time Tommy and I began our trip. The Disease took the old—killing some, simply putting others into a long, soft slumber—and the war took the young and everyone else tried to lose themselves in whatever they could: drugs, alcohol, sex, science, art, poetry. Everyone had impetus and direction now that everything was falling apart.

When it all first began, Tommy and I were too young for the war and far too young for The Disease, so we only walked in the shadow of it all, watching and waiting for our turn. Our parents were already dead and we didn't have any other family. We'd never live long enough to catch The Disease, so we viewed it with a detached interest and sympathy.

The Disease started in Russia, but because Russia tends to

be tight-lipped about what happens within its borders, it's been difficult for anyone to say just how long it had been happening before the rest of the world found out about it. The UK was the first country beyond Russia to notice the outbreak. It began in a retirement home in London where one morning the staff went to their patients' rooms to find all of them asleep and unable to be awakened. Within hours there were reports coming in from other countries about the extremely elderly falling asleep and never waking.

The Disease garnered a lot of different names in those first frightening weeks: The Lullaby, The Long Goodnight, Sundowners Disease. The last one was meant to make fun of the elderly. After all, those at the end of life were expected to pass away eventually. So for a while, the world was concerned, but not alarmed. It wasn't until The Disease had been quietly shutting the doors on the oldest of the population that someone at the CDC noticed a decline in the average age of The Disease's victims. Something that began affecting only those in their midnineties and above had progressed to affect those about five years younger. Then the world watched as, over the next couple of years, the average age was reduced even further.

The Disease was coming for everyone. It would begin by emptying out the nursing homes, then progress to the retirement villages, then on and on until, eventually, it would hollow out the office buildings, the nightclubs the youth had once filled with reverie until, one day, there would be no one alive old enough to reproduce. Not long after that, whatever children left would turn out the lights on humanity by drifting off into one long, peaceful slumber.

The world would not end with a bang or a whimper, but in a restful sigh.

Staring down the barrel of that future was what sparked the war. As people panicked they began to blame others. And that

blaming donned a coat of nationalism. Russia was the primary target in the beginning since that was where The Disease had begun. Before long, the war spilled over from its borders and into the rest of the world.

Now, five years later, America was the last uninvaded country on the planet. But that wouldn't last. The average age of victims of The Disease had reached sixty—the age of most politicians and military officials. The war was losing its direction and ambling on the shaky legs of enlisted men and women who didn't see any point in fighting when there was a disease coming for them. So the government turned back to the draft.

The Disease was too far away for seventeen-year-olds to really understand or fear. Youth has always been a haven for invincibility, and this was no different. The papers from the draft board went out, scooping up boys and girls in its bloody hands. And one after another they went, they died, and the world grew a little lonelier.

Though it all felt far away from me and Tommy, I knew, of course, that it couldn't last.

Our parents had been dreamers. Our mother was a teacher and believer in things magical, like newspaper horoscopes and the ability of whispered fears to manifest in a person's life. Our father believed in magic of a different kind. He was a writer and, sometimes, amateur astronomer. His magic was a distant moon named Europa.

He fell in love with it at an early age and then passed that love on to my brother and me. He could never know where his obsession with a small ice rock located over three hundred million miles away would lead his children. Like the stars led our father, the memory of our father led my brother and me.

For me, our journey started before I was even born, in letters my father wrote to me and my brother. For Tommy, it all started with a letter from the Draft Board.

For three hard days my brother failed to find the words to explain his impending death to me. With furrowed brow and taut jaw he tried to find a way that, when he laid the news out in front of me, its hardness would be sanded off like a pebble rubbed smooth and glossy over the life of an old river. We were all each other had. Brother and sister. Twins, seventeen years from the womb. How I'd get on without him once he was dead, he didn't know.

In the end, because he had never been any good with words, my brother never did find out the right way to say it. After failing to come up with an alternative he only handed me the brown envelope, with his head hung like a penitent child—even shuffling his feet a little, suddenly making himself smaller than he had been in years—and he said in a low voice, "I won the lottery, Virginia." Then he smiled, as though a smile meant a person was actually happy.

I took the envelope, knowing immediately what it was. Everyone knew what the draft notices looked like. They were a spreading plague, a dark shadow that came for friends and loved ones, took them away and never brought them back. The war was going from bad to worse. As if war had ever done anything else.

I only looked at the letter that would eventually take my brother to his death. I pointed to the awkward font that printed his name in that excited, prize-winner's way, clucked a stiff laugh and said, with no small amount of derision: "Terrible. Just terrible."

ESCAPE VELOCITIES

ONE

IN THE MIDDLE of a pockmarked crossroads someone had painted the word PEACE in six-foot-tall white letters on the edge of a crater. The night was late and the road black, but the word—what was left of it—caught the starlight and glowed. The lettering was sharp and formal, placed by a steady hand. Someone had cared. About the letters. Maybe even about the word. So I couldn't quite understand how PEACE had met such a bad end out here in the middle of nowhere.

And it truly was nowhere.

If you've never been to Oklahoma, you should go. It's a beautiful place, a place where everything seems to stand alone. Lone trees strike out of the distant horizon, so far away from anything it makes you wonder how a lone seed could ever have gotten there in the first place. In Oklahoma, far houses stand and watch over grassland oceans that shimmer in the dim moonlight. In Oklahoma, the wind has long legs that carry rain clouds on stalks of gray. In Oklahoma, the sun rises far, reigns high, and then comes close in the evening and sits beside you until you doze off on the front porch.

Oklahoma is a place where loners have formed a community. It's a place where people are both alone and together at

the same time, like Tommy and I always were. It's a special thing: always having someone with you. It gives you legs to stand on.

I was seventeen when Tommy and I ran away from the war and started on what would come to be our last trip together. Seventeen's an odd age. Too old for dreams, too young for reality.

It was a hard January when this all happened. Any promise of spring was far off as I walked the frozen highway. The ground was still locked from cold and every particle of snow had been swept away so that there was only brown, barren earth. The cold swelled up around me like static on an old television. Now and again the starlight seemed to exhale and the wind raced over the empty winter fields and passed through me hard enough and frigid enough that it frightened me.

To keep my hands from trembling, I turned them to fists buried inside my pockets. To keep my teeth from chattering, my jaw was locked. The muscles ached from holding station. I stomped my feet to keep my toes connected to my body. Now and again they drifted off on their own accord. I was never quite sure if they would return.

But even with all of this, there was beauty. Several hours before, I watched as the failing light went dark and a fistful of bare winter trees jutting up from the sides of the road swung from being thick gray arteries to thin purple veins to black silhouettes that might have been calligraphy of some exotic language, punctuating the black cursive of the small highway scrawling through the countryside. Then the last of the light went away and all the ways the trees had looked became just another memory I would always carry in me.

I was alone that night…sort of. I hadn't seen a house since passing through a small, sleepy town before sunset, where the one stoplight on Main Street flashed off and on. Yellow in

one direction, red in the other. Even though lights sometimes burned inside the bowels of the homes—a mixture of trailers and two-story farmhouses with clapboard siding and old paint peeling like psoriasis—the town looked left behind, a city desiccated by plague. Everything was weathered and empty, ready to be filled by story and myth. I could imagine dragon eggs hidden in storm shelters, elder gods tucked away in attics. I've always had a tendency to drift off into imagination.

In the window of a darkened diner a sign—lit garish red by the town's single stoplight—declared God Blesses the War. Directly across the street, almost like a bookend, another sign hung in the window of a home and alleged God Left. So The Disease Came. I still don't know exactly who was right.

At one point I almost knocked on the door of one of the houses. A large gray-and-white affair with a tire swing dangling from an evergreen in the backyard and a late-model car parked in the front. I thought I saw someone in one of the upstairs windows. I stared up at them and they stared back down at me. It wasn't until my eyes adjusted that I realized it was only a teddy bear placed in the window, looking out, keeping diligent watch the way only loyal stuffed animals can.

For a moment the feeling of being watched caused me to think it was him. He was coming for me and he wouldn't stop. That's just who he was.

My palms were sweating and my heart was a frightened bird beating against my rib cage. All because of a teddy bear standing watch.

I waved at the guardian, laughed at myself and walked on until the houses stopped appearing and the town sank into the earth behind me. The moment was relegated to history and memory, which, for me, have always been one and the same.

Tommy and I called it "The Memory Gospel."

The Memory Gospel was simple, really: I remember every-

thing. Truly and honestly everything. Every second of every day. Every conversation. Every place I've ever been. Every person I've ever met. Every word I've ever said. Every news report I've ever seen. Every letter of every sentence of every page of every book I've ever read. Every shaggy tree that slanted at an odd angle and was dappled by the dying sunlight in a way that might never again repeat and made a person say to themselves "I hope I never forget this. Never ever."

I don't forget any of it. Not a single moment. I carry all of it inside me.

Every laugh. Every schoolyard bully. Every foster parent who tried. Every social worker who failed. Every time I've stood outside and looked up into the sky and counted the stars until there were tears at the corners of my eyes because I remembered—as if I could ever forget—that my parents were still dead and would never be able to come and stand beside me and take my hand and point up to the night sky and say to me, the way people did in movies, "It makes you feel so small, doesn't it?"

My memory was, is, and always will be, immutable.

The Memory Gospel is the one thing in my life that I can believe in. It's always with me, filling me up and hollowing me out all at the same time, like the way a person can stand before a mountain in the winter and see the light spilling over its craggy shoulders and understand, in that brief instant, that life comes and goes and one day we all will. Like you're part of something and a part of nothing all at once. The Memory Gospel is all-encompassing and inescapable. A forest I can neither get lost in nor find my way out of.

And so I've come to consider myself the chronicler of the last days of the world.

I kept walking with my head down and my shoulders up and the past swirling above my head. I wished for a peaceful, silent

cold—the way it sometimes happened in the nights when the snow fell like dust and you woke in the morning to a world you knew but didn't recognize, like a childhood friend you haven't seen in decades. But the wind stayed hard and unreasonable. It swept down off the mountains in a roar that shoved me forward and almost put me on my face a few times. I always managed to catch myself just before I fell. Eventually I decided to let the wind help. It was heading in the same direction I was, after all. Why not let it push me along? Why not let it carry me off into The Memory Gospel…

…I'm five years old and hanging upside down in a crashed car. The seat belt holds me tight across the waist and my ears are ringing and there is the sound of water falling outside and Tommy is on the ceiling of the overturned car crying and looking around. "It's going to be okay," my mother says, and suddenly I'm standing in the middle of the road staring down at the word PEACE and I'm terrified and hanging upside down again and I'm in a foster home and I'm attending the funeral of my parents and the social worker is saying, "It's going to be okay," and I'm squeezing Tommy's hand and staring up at a black, starry sky and staring up at the ceiling of the overturned car and Tommy is still crying and there is blood trickling from his head and our father is dead and our mother is saying, over and over again, "It's going to be okay… It's going to be okay…" and her voice is softening with each recitation and I'm standing alone in the world and the wind is cold and I am seventeen and still trapped in my five-year-old self watching my parents die and I don't want to see it so I close my eyes…

…like fists and pushed the memories away.

It's like I told you: I have a tendency to drift.

I stopped walking. When I had finally clawed my way out of what was and into what is, I opened my eyes and looked up at the stars.

Andromeda was brighter than usual that night. One trillion

stars burning, raging. Reduced by time and distance to little more than a pinprick of noiseless light. That's how memory was supposed to work. A narrowing down. A softening that made it possible to let go of unwanted or painful memories. Maybe that was why I liked astronomy as much as I did—and still do. It proved that with enough time, even the brightest stars burned out. Everything faded away eventually.

But I understood that, because of distance and time, when you saw a star you only ever saw the way it used to be. Even the sun was eight minutes in the past by the time you saw it.

"Andromeda," I began, smothering the memory of the car crash with bare, calm facts. "Officially designated as NGC 224. Coordinates: RA 0° 42m 44s | Dec 41° 16.152' 9". 2.537 million light-years away. Two hundred twenty thousand light-years across. 1.5×10^{12} solar masses—estimated. Apparent magnitude of 3.4." On and on I continued. Definitions of mass, luminosity. It was a spiral galaxy and I quoted the composition of each of the spiral's arms. Fact after fact after fact, pulled perfect and undiminished from memory.

I built a levee with each fact, and the recollected dead receded back into their holding places.

"Ten more miles," I said, looking off down the cold, empty, dark road ahead. "Seventeen thousand six hundred yards. Fifty-two thousand eight hundred feet. Six hundred thirty-three thousand six hundred inches…and a partridge in a pear tree." I sang the last part. Badly. But the starlight didn't seem to mind.

I took one final look up at the sky. I found Jupiter. I found its moon Europa—nothing more than a whisper of light so difficult to see it made my eyes hurt and I wondered if what I saw was real. But whether I actually saw Europa or only imagined seeing it didn't seem to matter. To some extent, we are

all solipsists. I started walking again, heading toward Florida and the last shuttle launch of human history.

I had just passed the crossroads where PEACE was written when the headlights rose out of the far darkness behind me. It had only ever been a matter of time. So I stopped and waited for what was coming.

The headlights approached in cold silence, then the silence shifted into what was almost the sound of applause as tires sizzled over the cold pavement. A chill raced down my spine as the blue lights atop the car flashed into existence.

The police car stopped in front of me. The headlights glared bright enough that I had to shield my eyes. The car shifted into Park and sat idling for a moment. A small plume of steam rose from the exhaust, effervescing into the darkness. The door opened. Booted feet thumped onto the pavement like punctuation at the end of a grim declaration about life. The lights still shone too brightly for me to see who had stepped out of the car, but I didn't need to see in order to know that it was him.

"Got pretty far," he said finally. "I'll give you that much." His voice was as hard as steel, like always. Because of the headlights, he was only a deep shadow and a deeper voice, like thunder come to visit in the late hours of the night. His breath steamed from his lips and expanded into a small anvil head cloud above him.

"I could explain to you why it's important, but you wouldn't understand." There was arrogance in my voice and I knew it, but I didn't try to curb it. At this point, there was no turning back, nothing to be said that would undo what was already done. I knew, better than most, that time's arrow only moves forward. "I'm going to be there to see it," I said. "And I'm never coming back."

He stepped away from the car door and walked out in front of the headlights. I counted each one of my heartbeats, if only to keep myself calm. He was tall and broad as he had always been. His hair cropped close as a harvested field. The backlight of the car's high beams turned him into a monolith, eternal and omnipotent. Something to be worshipped, if only for its cruel disinterest.

He looked around, scanning the open field of darkness surrounding us. Then he sighed. "You Embers are something else," he said. Then he spat. "You've had your fun. Now, where is he?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the blow landed against the back of his head. A tremble went through his body and he slumped to his knees with a pained groan. Then Tommy was there, standing behind him, his fist trembling.

"Run," Tommy said, as our foster father fell unconscious at his feet.

ELSEWHERE

THE HARDEST THING was convincing herself not to be afraid of falling asleep. Each and every evening she watched the news and watched talk of The Disease. Her friend over in Alamance County had come down with it. Fell asleep on the sofa one night and then, when morning came, nobody heard from her until her children found her. And this was back near the beginning. Her friend was eighty-seven years old, but spry for her age. Still, spryness doesn't do anything to repel the unexpected. But wasn't that the way it had always been?

And now nearly ten years had passed and The Disease was creeping ever closer to people her age. So, like many people of a certain age in this world, she figured that the best thing she could do was to get herself away from everybody. She went down to the store and bought herself as much food as her dead husband's pickup truck could carry and she came home and loaded up the house and then went back and filled the truck up again and, this time, she also picked up as many sheets of plastic as she could. And duct tape and disinfectant and even a gas mask—which were slowly becoming all the rage even though nobody knew whether or not they would do any good.

When all was said and done she had everything she needed to live for at least a year. Yeah, it might be a year of eating potted meat and

crackers until she was blue in the face, but Lord knows there were worse things in this world.

She lived far enough outside of town that she could live the type of life she wanted. The farm was big and old and her dead husband's pride right up until the day he dropped dead, still sitting atop the same tractor he'd bought when they first got the farm. He'd been dead for nearly twenty years and she was glad that he didn't live to see the world get to where it was: the killing, the dying, the slow fading away of everything that the whole damn species had spent thousands of years building.

No. He was always too softhearted to be able to stand for such a thing. If that heart attack hadn't done him the pitiful kindness of taking him when it did, he would have turned on the news in the world today and died from a plain old broken heart.

She thought about her husband a lot in those first few months of living alone, isolated from the rest of the world. Mostly she thought about him as a way to keep from thinking about everything else that was going on around her. She stopped turning on the news in the mornings because it did nothing but let in the worst parts of the world. Nobody said anything good anymore.

And so she would get up at the crack of dawn—always thankful and amazed and terrified to have woken up at all—and piddle about the house before time came to go out and tend to the garden and she would think about her husband and maybe she would hum some song that he used to love—he'd always been partial to Frank Sinatra—and, as the weeks stretched out into months, maybe she would even talk to her dead husband even though she knew good and hell well that he was dead and she wasn't the type to believe that the dead could hear the breath of the living. But she did it anyway.

Some mornings she talked to him about the past. She told him about the children they'd never had and how she, finally, after all these years, could say that she was glad that they'd never come along. "I just couldn't live with myself if I had to watch those pretty blue eyes

worry over this world," she said. The only answer the house gave back to her was the gentle clunk-clunk-clunk *of the grandfather clock in the living room that never kept the right time but that she wound up anyway because, even if it wasn't doing a good job, it was important for everything in this world to have a purpose.*

That old clock made her think about her own purpose. What was it? Her purpose?

What was a woman without purpose?

What was anyone without purpose?

She asked her dead husband that one night when she woke up from a bad dream—a dream that she'd fallen asleep and been unable to wake up from it. Her palms were sweaty and her long hair matted to her brow and her cheeks were slick with tears, and the words trembled out of her lips like a newborn foal. "What's my purpose?" she asked.

And her dead husband did not answer her back, even though she sat and waited to hear his heavy, soft voice for over an hour with the darkness and the clunking of that clock down below counting off its irregular and inconstant seconds.

That was the night that she made a promise never to go to sleep again. She'd stay up for as long as she had to, until The Disease came and went and burned away the rest of humanity and all that was left was her and then, by God, she'd know what her purpose was. She'd have the answer she'd been waiting for and she wouldn't wake up at night sweating and calling out for her husband because, in the end, she couldn't go on like this: afraid of sleep and afraid of life both at the same time.

She didn't make it a full two days before falling asleep again.

She tried everything to stop it from happening. She drank coffee until it made her head hurt and her chest tight. She went back to watching the news, hoping that the fear the news gave would make her more able to sit up in the late hours and not fall asleep. The news told her about seventeen new cases of The Disease that had been found

around the county and that did give her just the right amount of terror that she needed to stay awake for a little while longer.

But she was an old woman and, try as she might, she could feel the sleep walking her down, as steady as that old clock in the living room and, just before she finally fell asleep—a sleep that she would never wake from, something she knew in the pit of her stomach—she thought she heard her husband's voice one more time. He said a single word: "Love."

And her final thought before she fell into the deep, timeless slumber of The Disease was that her question had finally been answered.

TWO

FOR WHAT FELT like an eternity, I was unable to breathe. Seeing Jim Gannon at Tommy's feet, I realized I hadn't really expected for it to work. Gannon was six-foot-two and built like a bad dream. All angles and muscle. More animal than man. And that was before you took into account the police uniform that filled him out with cold authority and made you nervous about crimes you hadn't committed.

When I finally did breathe again the air rushed into my lungs, air so thick you could drink it, choke on it if you weren't careful. I felt light-headed and gritted my teeth until the feeling went away.

Standing there in the cold darkness with our foster father lying at Tommy's feet, I thought of all the ways it could have gone wrong:

Tommy could have stumbled on the uneven earth as he climbed up out of the darkness along the edge of the road, stumbled just loud enough for Gannon to hear him and turn and draw his pistol and squeeze the trigger and put an end to everything. It wouldn't have been anything other than a reflex action for Gannon. Law enforcement training taking over.

But it still would have ended Tommy's life. Just a sudden flash like a lightbulb bursting, then the long darkness.

Or he could have gotten caught in the headlights of Gannon's car long before he noticed them. It had been my idea that Tommy follow along at a distance, away from the road, buried in the outer dark, orbiting like some phantom planet. "It won't be long before he catches up," I had said. "Do what I tell you and we'll be okay." And so he did.

Only now that Gannon was unconscious on the cold, deserted road did Tommy and I laugh.

The laughter was fleeting, but wonderful, like a meteor slashing across the night sky.

"We've got to get him out of the road," I said.

Tommy flinched. He looked up to see me still standing there in front of the car. "I told you to run," Tommy said, his voice steady and even.

"We've got to get him off the road," I repeated. I was already jogging around and opening the rear door of the police car.

Tommy reached down and took the pistol from Gannon's holster.

"Take the bullets out of it and throw that away," I said.

He placed the gun on the highway. He fumbled through the pockets on Gannon's belt. "Hold these," he said, handing me the man's handcuffs. "Hurry up," he barked.

I took the cuffs. "You don't need these," I said.

Tommy rolled Gannon over and, after a few awkward moments, managed to pull him up off the ground and lift him over his back in a fireman's carry. He'd wrestled off and on growing up. Most of the schools in most of the foster homes he and I had been shuffled through over the years had wrestling programs in some form or other. He'd actually managed to get pretty good at it. The physical side of it—all of the

strength and muscles required—were just a matter of deciding to do it. The mental aspect required a lot of thought and Tommy wasn't much of a thinker, but he had gotten pretty good at that too. He could always tell what his opponent was planning. He always knew, milliseconds before it happened, when someone was going to shoot their hips forward or try to spin out or go for an underhook. And his mind reacted to it all on its own. He didn't have to think about it. It was one of the few things in his life, maybe even the only thing, that had come naturally to him. If he'd ever stayed in a single school for more than a season, maybe he would have gotten recruited by some college. Maybe in one of those places where wrestling was a pastime and boys like him could be someone people admired.

But he never did stay anywhere longer than a season and so he never had gotten really good and there were no college recruiters looking for him. The only person looking for him was the unconscious foster father he carried on his back.

Just as Tommy got Gannon to the car, I opened the door and there, sitting in the back seat and as quiet as a corpse, was the Old Man, Jim Gannon's father himself. He'd had a stroke years ago and been confined to his body ever since. The doctors said that he was aware, but paralyzed and unable to speak. The most he ever did was blink, and even that came only on rare occasions.

Gannon had dressed him in khaki work pants and a flannel shirt and a pair of soft-soled nurse's shoes. The Old Man didn't seem to register me as I opened the door and took a moment to stare at him.

"What is it?" Tommy asked.

"It's the Old Man."

"What?" Tommy looked past me. "Is he sick?" Tommy asked. "The Disease?"

"No," I said.

Gannon groaned a little, in the early stages of coming around.

"Give me the handcuffs," Tommy said.

"You don't need to handcuff him," I replied. "Just shut the door. It can only be opened from the outside. He won't be able to get out."

"Give me the handcuffs, Virginia!"

"You. Don't. Need. Them," I said, laying each word out like a brick. Then I turned and tossed the handcuffs out into the darkness. "Don't be so simple."

Tommy was deciding whether or not to run out after them when Gannon, suddenly back to his senses, grabbed his arm. "Tommy…" Gannon said, groggy and slow.

Tommy snatched Gannon's hand away and shoved him to the far side of the back seat. Then he bolted back just in time for me to slam the door closed, locking the man inside. "Tommy!" Gannon called. He looked out at the boy through the window, a firm calmness in his eyes. "Tommy…open this door."

Without a word Tommy walked around to the front of the car and picked up the pistol that still lay in the middle of the street.

"I told you to throw that away," I said.

He tucked the gun into the pocket of his coat. "If you want it, come over here and take it." His voice was a hard, low warning, something that would let his sister know that for all of my intelligence, despite that flawless, unbreakable memory of mine, he was powerful in his own right. He'd saved me. Not for the first time, and not for the last.

"You're welcome," Tommy said.

"It was my idea," I replied.

"You're still welcome."

Then we stood there in the dark and the cold, looking at

the man trapped in the back seat of the car. It would be up to me to figure out what to do next. And it would be up to Tommy to do whatever needed to be done. Just like always. I would get us both to Florida in time to watch the launch and then, after that, I wouldn't need him anymore. And, at the same time, he wouldn't need me anymore. He'd go off to the war. Do his duty the way his draft notice demanded. He would die.

It was the only way things could turn out for us, no matter how much we wanted it to be different. We couldn't know that at the time, but years later, the past would be immutable, and I would have to live with it, perfectly preserved in the halls of memory. And, years later, I would be able to speak for my lost brother, to see this trip the way he had seen it. The last great gift he gave to me.

Tommy hadn't been a smart boy and he would never become a smart man. But that wasn't what really bothered my brother. Neither was it that The Disease or the war would one day find him. The latter, in fact, I'd almost say Tommy always saw as something inevitable. Maybe even welcomed.

Tommy told me once that he could never be like me. Not even if he tried at it every single day for five hundred years, cloistered away like a monk. He'd only ever come up short. He said he'd known that for about as far back as he could remember—which wasn't very far. To be sure, he had memories. As many as most other people did, he figured. He remembered important stuff: the first girl he'd kissed, the first time he got in trouble in grade school, a smattering of song lyrics, a handful of lines from movies. If he was supposed to show up somewhere at a certain time on a certain day he could, for the most part, hold that much in his head. Maybe he'd have to check the calendar again and again in the days

before and tell himself, "Now, don't forget!" But that's how it went. That's how it was with everybody.

Everybody except me.

In the last few years before our final trip together, perhaps sensing his growing unease, his body no longer looked like a copy of mine. He had shot up four inches above me and filled out wide and strong. He was all muscle and intention. In spite of the changes to his body, he and I still shared much of the same face. Sometimes when we were together I could look at Tommy and find myself overcome with a feeling of both loneliness and togetherness all at once. Being a twin was cruel in its own way. From the moment you were born you were let in on the dark secret of humanity, the thing that no one wants to know about themselves: that a person is both unique and, at the same time, mass produced. And therefore no better than anyone else.

Hell of a thing for a child to have to grow up knowing.

By the age of twelve Tommy was already being told that he was handsome. Not cute, the way people told it to the other boys his age, but handsome, the way people spoke of grown men. He was athletic. Strong. Everyone knew he would grow up to do something physical. Maybe he'd be a boxer or a wrestler, but never a bully. And then, assuming he lived long enough, the architecture of his physique promised that he could be the type of man that made people feel safe when they had every reason to be afraid. Maybe after he'd been wrestling for a few years he would become a firefighter. Policeman, perhaps. He had a good smile. "A soft smile," people told him, girls especially. Maybe he'd become a doctor with a stern voice but a soft smile, the kind you trusted to save you no matter what harm you had brought upon yourself.

But that was before things started falling apart. Back when young people like us still thought they could grow up to

be something other than what they would come to call us: "Embers." It was our job, or so the joke went, to be the last remnants of the flame that had burned so long. And, like all Embers, to eventually burn out.

From the time we were five Tommy and I had been shifted from foster home to foster home. Nothing to do with The Disease—that was still years away. But simply because our parents had already died and left us and we became "difficult" children. Maybe it was just the way we were. Or maybe it was because, after their deaths, the only thing we had to remember our parents by was a stack of letters that I'd read once and burned the next day.

After the letters were gone there were only Tommy and me, and we were always together. Only twice had anyone tried to separate us. Tommy had been the one they wanted.

The first time, no less than a day after Tommy had gone, I ran away from the group home in which he had left me behind and found his new home. It wasn't difficult. Just a matter of getting the records from the social worker's paperwork when she wasn't looking. I snuck into Tommy's room at night, took his hand and left. We made it a day and a half on our own before we were found. The couple who had taken him in gave him up after that and the two of us returned to the same foster home we had been in before. We were together again.

The second time it happened—again, he had been the one the adoptive family wanted—we were thirteen. We ran away again and made it alone together for almost a week. During that week, Tommy thought of a dozen good reasons why we should keep going. He had this idea of picking a direction—any direction—and simply going until that direction ran out. The world was big and we could get lost in it. And even though we would be lost, we would be together the way we had always been.

"We're too young to keep running," I said. "Nobody searches for anyone as hard as they search for lost kids."

"We're not kids," Tommy said, and in just saying so I realized how young he sounded. "They'll break us up again if we go back, Ginny."

"Don't call me Ginny," I answered. "It's what you called me when we were babies. And I'm not a baby anymore."

We were standing beneath an overpass just after sunset, listening to the sound of the cars racing by in light rain, their tires sizzling like bacon. When the big trucks went by overhead there was the *calump-calump-calump* of the expansion gaps in the concrete.

"We'll go back and I'll tell them what they need to hear to make sure they keep us together," I said. I tucked my hands in my pockets and stared off into the distance. The entire conversation was only a formality to be endured before it led to its obvious conclusion.

Tommy's face tightened into a knot. "Dammit, *Virginia*!" he said, leaning hard on my name after planting the flag of "dammit." Curse words were still new to him and still had power. "We can find somewhere to live." We could both feel the momentum of words building inside him, like a shopping cart just beginning to rattle down a steep hill. "We can go off and make a home. We're each other's home when you really stop to think about it!" He belted the words out. He opened his arms, proudly, like a carnival barker making his greatest pitch.

He searched for words that would undo me, but found only the empty breath inside his lungs. If he tried to press me he knew I could always bring up facts and figures, numbers and math enough to break down anything he said. I could recite articles verbatim about the survival rates of runaways if I wanted. True stories of children found dead. Statistics about

how badly everything could go for us if the world so decided. I could crunch the math in my head and rattle off the probabilities: such and such a chance of getting kidnapped, such and such a percentage of turning to drugs or prostitution or anything else. On and on, I always knew how to break down any resistance he ever had to anything.

Tommy looked at me, his face soft and afraid and frustrated all at the same time. His mind reached for something to say but his lips knew the fact of futility. Only I could change it. Only I could let him win the argument that he so desperately needed to win.

And he knew—we both knew, and hated—that I wouldn't let him win.

Rather than fight it, rather than try to make the case for the things he thought we should do, he conceded. Tommy's life was always easier when he just did what I wanted.

"So be it," he said.

"Tommy?"

"What?" he answered, sighing the word as his body slumped upon its frame, resigned to defeat.

"They're never going to break us apart," I said.

"Then why do they keep trying?"

I walked over and wrapped my arms around him. He was outgrowing me already and my arms had to work to surround him, but the work was rewarded by the feeling of my brother captured, like some splendid and frail animal, in my arms. I had to protect him. It was my job.

"We won't ever be separated," I said.

"But—"

"I promise, Tommy."

"You can't know that, Ginny. Mom and Dad said they'd always be here too."

Tommy's body shuddered and I knew that he was crying.

He wrapped his arms around me, if only to keep me from seeing his tears the way boys and men are known to do.

"Mom and Dad haven't left," I said. "They're in me. In The Memory Gospel. And they're in you too."

"I can't remember like you can," Tommy said, almost as an apology.

"It doesn't matter. They're in you. We're together. A family. And we'll always be that."

"You promise?"

"Just as sure as my name's Ginny."

We stood for a long time, holding one another, and the world passed us by.

…calump-calump-calump…

Like a beating heart fading into nothingness. And when the sound went away, when the world had drifted off into silence, we were still there, together. The way it would always be for my brother and me.

After that we went back to the foster family who had taken him in and, just as before, the family didn't want Tommy unless it was without me. So we found ourselves lost in the system. But at least we were lost together.

Four years later, we were seventeen and running away again, but this time, we wouldn't go back. The launch in Florida wouldn't wait for me the way the war and death would wait for Tommy.

In three days, when this would all be over.

So be it.

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The Crossing

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