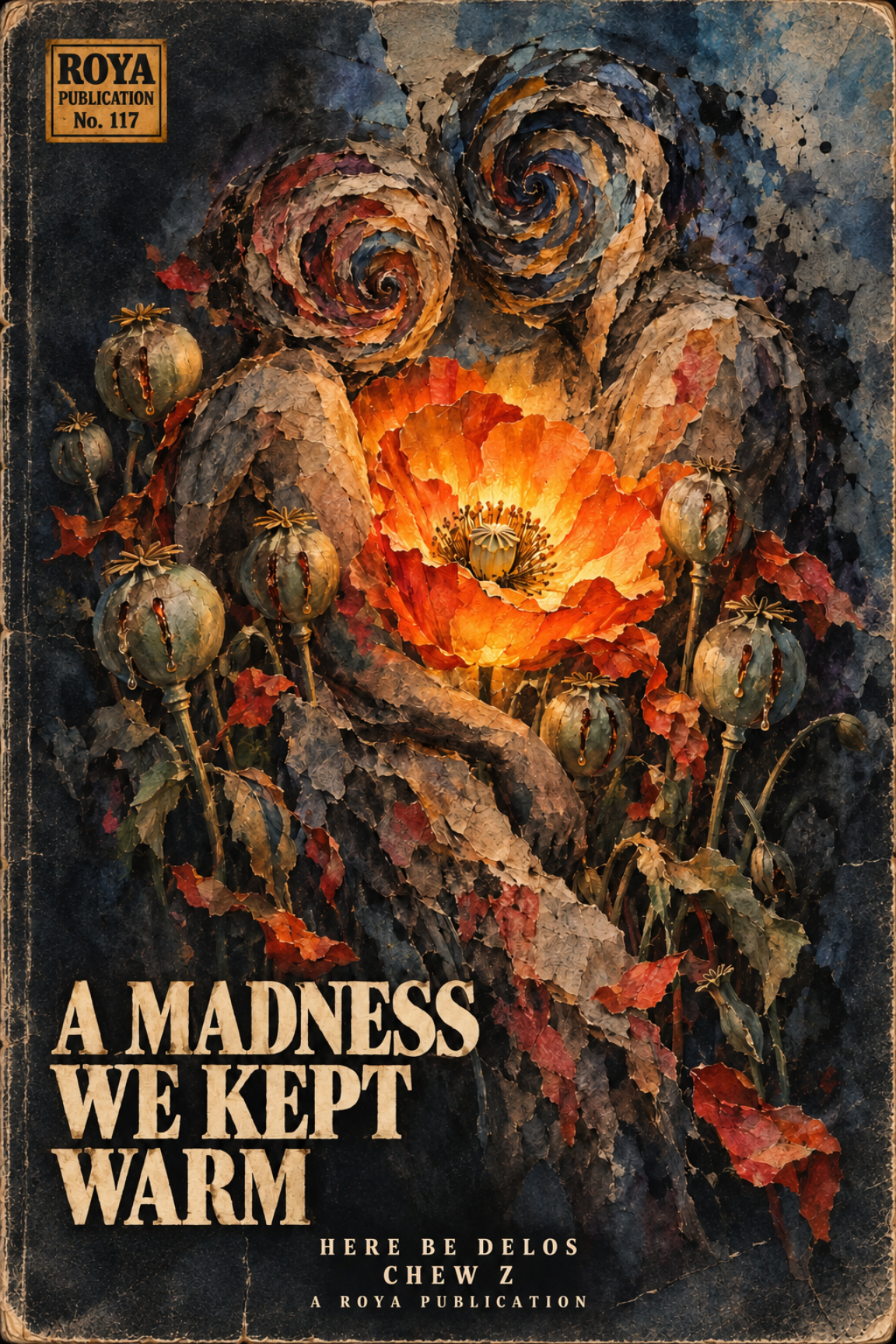

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A MADNESS WE KEPT WARM
HERE BE DELOS
CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

A MADNESS WE KEPT WARM

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 117

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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LONDINIUM
ANATOLIA
POPPY GROUND
HERE BE
THE JOY PLANT
MARE MEDITERRANEUM

THE BOOK BEFORE

Each of these books stands on its own, and if this is where you have come in, you have missed nothing you need. The one before this was about a man who went home.

He was past fifty, a careful man who had spent his working life bringing faded photographs and ruined old films back from the edge of nothing — a restorer of other people's pasts, which is a strange trade for a man who had walked away from his own as young as he could. He had a mother, very old now, in the house on the California hillside he had grown up in and left. Word reached him that she was slipping: that her mind had come loose from the present, that she wandered in the garden and spoke to people who were not there, that she was, the word everyone used, going. So he went back, to sit with her at the end, in the overgrown garden she had never once in fifty years let anyone touch.

What he found was not what the word had promised. His mother was somewhere, all right — but not nowhere, and not simply lost. There was a shape to her wandering, a reason folded into the wild green of that garden, a thing she had been tending in plain sight for half a century that he had been too far away, and too afraid, to see. The distance between them, he began to understand, had never been the ordinary distance of a son who leaves. It had been built, on purpose, and kept.

That is all I will tell you, because the rest is that book's to keep. This one is about something else, and someone else, three thousand miles east, in a dying town in the mountains.

SYNOPSIS

Clare and Daniel have been married most of their lives, and they are writers — two people who met over a sentence and have spent the thirty years since putting the world into words, badly paid and perfectly matched. The city they built that life in has grown too expensive to go on writing in, so they do a brave and foolish thing: they sell what they have and buy a cheap, beautiful house at the end of the world, a dying coal town in the West Virginia mountains, to write at last the second books that would not come.

For almost two years, in the gold light and the quiet, it works. They are happy. The work returns, better than it has ever been. And then, on an ordinary spring night, coming home over the mountain, a deer steps into the road.

What the hospital sends them home with, for the long mending and the pain that will not fully leave, comes into the house looking exactly like mercy.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A word before you begin, because this one asks for it.

This is a book about the poppy, and about the long warm road it has walked beside us for ten thousand years, and the thing at the far end of that road that is still, as I write, taking more people every year than the last. It does not look away from where the road ends. If you have lost someone down it, parts of this will be hard, and I would rather say so now.

Alder is invented; there is no such town in West Virginia, and Clare and Daniel never lived. But the road that runs through the book is real — the accident, the amber bottle, the kind tired doctor, the staircase down, the town where it was in half the houses — and it is the true shape of what happened to a great many real people, and is happening still.

The title is an old idea in plain clothes. Doctors have a name for a shared madness — a delusion two people who love each other hold up between them, each keeping it warm in the other, so that neither can set it down alone. This is a book about two such people, and the warm thing they kept between them all the way down, and how the very closeness that saved them was also the thing that would not let them go.

One last thing, flatly, with no wink in it. Nowhere in this book is there a how: I have named the danger everywhere and the method nowhere, on purpose. And if you take from these pages that the warmth was worth it, you have read a different book than the one I wrote. The warmth was a counterfeit and a thief. What was worth it — if anything in that ruin was — is a thing the one who lived to tell it argues with herself to the last page and never quite wins, and I have left it unfinished.

Chew Z

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I. THE GOOD YEARS

1.

There are two stacks of notebooks on the desk in front of me, and one of them is still his.

Mine are on the left, and they are the cheap kind, the ones you buy in a plastic sleeve of five at the drugstore, because for a long time that was what we could afford and then for a longer time it was what we were used to. His are on the right. His were always nicer. He would not write in anything cheap; he said a sentence could tell what you had bought to keep it in, which was the kind of thing he said, and which I used to think was a pose and have since decided was simply true. His are cloth over board, dark blue and dark green and one the color of a brown egg, and the spines are soft now from being opened, and his handwriting is inside them, going a little downhill the way it always did on the right-hand page, as if the words were tired and leaning toward the gutter to rest.

I am sixty-one years old and I have been clean for ten years, and I am writing this at the same desk where we were going to write the books that were going to change our lives, in the same house, in the town we moved to on purpose, which is a thing I still cannot entirely explain to people, that we chose it, that we drove toward it with the windows down and the radio on and thought *there, that one, that's where the good part starts.*

We were right, is the thing nobody wants me to say. The good part did start there. I just didn't know yet that the word *good* was going to have to stretch to cover everything that came, the way a single sheet gets pulled up over two people and never quite reaches both, and you spend the whole night, half asleep, tugging it one way and the other, trying to keep you both warm under the one thing you have.

This is the book we were supposed to write. The second one. The one that wouldn't come. It took me nine years and his death to find out what it was about, and it turns out it was about us, which is the one subject we were both always too proud and too frightened to touch. I am writing it out of both of us, because that is the only honest way I know to tell it: me now, at the desk, an old woman with good light and a cold cup of coffee; and Daniel then, in the blue notebook and the green one, saying it the way he said it, which was

always better than the way I say it, and I have stopped minding that. I minded it for thirty years. I don't anymore. There is nobody left to lose to.

So. Both of us. Here is how it was good.

2.

We met over a sentence, which is the most us thing that ever happened to us, and we fought about it for an hour, and the fight was the beginning of everything.

It was a workshop, a seminar room with bad chairs, the fall I was twenty-four. There were eleven of us and a famous teacher who mostly slept behind his glasses, and we went around the table taking a story apart the way you do at that age, cruelly and joyfully, because tearing a thing down is how the young prove they could build one. The story was mine. I had written a sentence I was in love with — I won't tell you what it was, it was terrible, it had a semicolon in it doing work no semicolon has ever been strong enough to do — and the room was being kind about it, which is to say they were killing it softly, and then a man at the end of the table whom I had not spoken to all semester said, "No, that sentence is the only honest thing in the whole story, you should throw out the story and keep the sentence."

That was Daniel. He was wrong about the story and right about the sentence, and I hated him for about forty minutes and then I didn't, and we went and got coffee that neither of us could afford and talked until the place closed and then walked until it got light, and I have told that story so many times that I no longer know which parts are true. But that part is. He read me the first time by the one sentence I had tried hardest to hide, and he liked me for exactly the thing I was most ashamed of, and if you want to know why a marriage lasts thirty years through everything ours went through, it is not more complicated than that. He was the one person who looked at the part of me I kept covered and said, *that, keep that, that's the good one.*

We were broke in the way that only the young can be broke and enjoy it. We had a one-room apartment over a dry cleaner and the whole place smelled of steam and clean cotton, and we wrote at the

same small table facing opposite walls so we wouldn't watch each other, and we were happy in a way I have spent a great deal of money and nearly my life trying to get back to, which is the whole story really, the whole thing in one sentence, so maybe Daniel was right and I should throw out the rest and keep that.

His first book came out when he was twenty-nine. Mine came out eight months later. They were small books from a small press, and they got the kind of reviews that are worse than being ignored, because they used the word *promising*, which in this business is what they carve on the headstone. *A promising debut.* We framed the worst sentence from each review and hung them over the table, his and mine, side by side, and we toasted them with the cheap wine, and we meant it, we were not being ironic, we were twenty-nine and thirty and someone had printed our books and put our names on the spines and shelved them in stores where strangers could find them, and we had each other, and we thought the hard part was behind us.

We had our rules by then — not the spoken kind, the other kind, the small private laws two people make without noticing that turn out to be the real constitution of a marriage. We wrote facing opposite walls and never showed each other a word until it was finished, because we'd learned early that a half-made thing shown too soon dies of being looked at. We broke every day at one o'clock, wherever we were and whatever was happening, and that hour was the hinge the whole day turned on. And every night, the last thing before sleep, we read each other the single worst sentence we had written that day — not the best, the worst, the most embarrassing, the one that proved we were frauds — and we laughed at it, and the laughing was what let us go back to the desk in the morning. I have thought about that one a great deal since. We built our whole life on showing each other the worst of ourselves in the dark and laughing, so that neither of us ever had to be alone with it. It turned out to be the only thing we really knew how to do. It turned out to be the only thing that mattered. And it was the one thing we forgot exactly once, at the very end, and the once was enough.

We had one real fight in all those early years, and I'll tell it to you, because a marriage that never shows you its one real fight is lying

to you about something. It was the reviews — the same critic, in the same column, a fortnight apart, called my little book promising and called Daniel's a disappointment, in that lazy practiced cruelty they use, and I watched it go into him like a splinter too deep to find and pull. And then he did the one thing of his I was never quite able to forgive, which was that he went away. Not out of the apartment. Inside himself. He closed a door I hadn't known was there and grieved it alone, for a week, courteous and absent, and every night I lay down beside a man who had gone somewhere I wasn't allowed, and it frightened me more than the review and more than the money, because I had married him precisely so as never to be alone again, and here I was, alone, in a bed with him in it. On the seventh night I couldn't bear it and I said the thing — I said, you can have the bad review, you can have every bit of it, but you do not get to go in there without me; wherever you go, you take me, the bad places most of all, that is the whole entire point of me. And he looked at me a long time, and something came back into his face that had been gone a week, and he said, you're right. That's the deal. I forgot the deal. And we never forgot it again — not once, in all the years, until the very last night of his life. I was twenty-nine. I did not know I had just spoken the one law that would save us over and over, and that would, the single time it was broken, be the end of everything. You never do know which of the things you say in a cheap apartment is the one your whole life will turn on. You just say them, and some of them turn out to be load-bearing, and you find out which ones at the end.

I want to stop here for a second, in the apartment over the dry cleaner, because I was happy there and I didn't know it, and that is the one unforgivable thing about being young, that the happiness is wasted on you, it runs through your hands like water and you are already looking past it at the next thing, the bigger book, the real reviews, the life that is about to start. I would give anything I have left to stand in that steam-smelling room one more time with the worst sentences of our lives framed on the wall and Daniel facing his wall and me facing mine and the two typewriters going like a pair of slow hearts. I did not know it was the good part. I thought it was the waiting room for the good part.

The good part was already happening. It is always already happening. That is the thing nobody can tell you so that you'll believe it.

3.

The second books would not come, for either of us, in the city.

I don't fully understand even now what happened. We had done the thing — we had written the first ones, the hungry ones, the ones you write not knowing if anyone will ever read them, which it turns out is the only way the hungry books get written, in that particular innocence that you only have once. And then people had read them, a few people, enough to print a second, and some part of the machinery that had run so sweetly in the dark seized up the moment a light was on it. I would sit down to write and instead of the story I would hear the reviews. Daniel would sit down and instead of the story he would hear the next review, the one that hadn't been written yet, the one that was going to decide whether he was a writer or a man who had once written a book. The blank page, which had been a field we ran into, became a wall we sat in front of.

And we had no money. That is the unromantic engine under the whole thing, and I'm going to be honest about it because money is what actually moves people's lives and novels pretend it isn't. The city had gotten expensive in the way cities do, quietly and then all at once, and the day jobs ate the hours the books needed, and we were forty-seven and forty-eight years old and we did the arithmetic one night at the same small table, facing each other now because we had long since stopped being shy, and the arithmetic said we could not keep doing this here.

Daniel found Alder. He found it the way he found everything, sideways, following a thread nobody else would have pulled. He was reading about the coal towns, for a book he never wrote, one of the forty books he never wrote, and he came across a photograph of a main street in West Virginia, a real main street, brick, with a river at the end of it and mountains standing up behind the river so steep and so green they looked fake, like a backdrop somebody had hung. And under the photograph it said that you could buy a house there,

a whole house, a tall narrow Victorian with a turret and a wraparound porch and colored glass in the front door, for less than one year of our rent.

“Look at this,” he said, and turned the laptop around, and I looked at it, and here is the thing I need you to understand, because everyone afterward wanted it to have been desperation, or foolishness, or running away. It wasn’t. It was *hope.* We looked at that photograph and we felt hope, pure and specific, the last fully clean hope I think I ever had. A town at the end of the world, cheap and beautiful and forgotten, where nobody knew us and nobody was waiting for our second books, where we could be hungry again on purpose, where the only two typewriters for fifty miles would be ours.

We drove down in October. I will not get the leaves right, so I won’t try; Daniel got the leaves right, once, in the green notebook, and I’ll let him do it. We came over the last ridge and down into the valley and the town was there along the river exactly like the photograph, brick and quiet, the mountains close and enormous, the light coming down gold and sideways through the gaps the way it does in those hollows, and I rolled the window down and the air came in cold and smelling of woodsmoke and the river and something sweet underneath, rotting leaves, the whole mountain breathing out, and I said the thing. *There. That one. That’s where the good part starts.*

I want that on the record before anything else is. That I said it, and that I was happy, and that I was not wrong.

4.

Here is Daniel, then. The blue notebook, the first week in the house, before the furniture came, when we were sleeping on an air mattress in the turret room because it had the best window.

The house is held up by paint and spite and we love it beyond reason. Clare has claimed the front parlor for her desk because of the colored glass — at four in the afternoon the light comes through the red pane and lies across the floorboards like something spilled, and she says she can’t write without it now, after one day, which is Clare entirely: she finds the one beautiful thing in a room and then

cannot live without it, and I married her for this and it will probably bankrupt me.

I have the back room that looks up the mountain. There is a seam of cold that comes under the door at night that no one can find the source of. I have decided it is the previous owner, a Mr. Hollis, dead nineteen years, who dug coal for forty of them and does not approve of two people from the city who have never done a day's real work buying his house to make up sentences in. I have started saying good morning to the cold seam. Clare thinks this is a bit. It is not a bit. A writer should be on speaking terms with the dead; they are most of the audience.

The town is the most beautiful ruined thing I have ever seen. They took the coal out of these mountains for a hundred years and then one day it was gone or it was cheaper somewhere else, and the companies folded their tents and left, and what they left behind is this — a brick main street built for ten thousand people, with maybe eight hundred left in it, so that the town wears its own grandeur like a good coat three sizes too big on a thin man. The opera house is a furniture store. The furniture store is empty. The bank is a church now and the church is for sale. Everything here used to be something else, and everyone here remembers when, and there is a sadness in that so thick and so gentle that I could write in it forever. I think I could write the real book here. I think we both could. I have not felt this in six years. I had forgotten the feeling had a name.

There is one thing. We went to the pharmacy on the second day, for aspirin and a mousetrap, and there was a line, a real line, a dozen people deep at eleven in the morning, quiet and patient and not quite looking at each other, and I made some joke to the woman ahead of us about small-town rush hour and she looked at me the way you look at a tourist, which is what I was, and said, "You're not from here," not unkindly, just placing me, and turned back around. I didn't understand the line. I understand it now, writing it down, the way you understand things an hour late at the desk, which is the only place I ever understand anything. But that first week I just thought: how strange, how patient, what a lot of sick people for such a small town. And then I forgot about it, because the light was

coming through Clare's red pane, and I had a book in me again, and I was happy.

5.

We were happy for almost two years, and I am not going to rush past them to get to the part everyone's waiting for, because those two years were real and they were ours and nobody can have them back from us, not the reviewers and not the doctors and not the ones who came to the funeral and held my hands in both of theirs and looked at me as if I were the lesson at the end of a story.

We fixed the house with our own hands, badly. We learned the town. We learned that if you stand still in a place like Alder long enough it stops performing its sadness for you and just lets you in, and underneath the ruin there was a living town, stubborn and funny and kind in the flinty way of people who have been left behind by history and have decided to be decent to each other anyway because there's no one else coming. We had people to dinner. Daniel grew tomatoes in the side yard and lost a war to the deer about it that gave him more pleasure than winning would have. I started a book, a real one, I could feel it was real, the way you can feel a fever before the thermometer agrees — the second book, the one that would not come in the city, came in Alder, it started to come, slow and strange and mine.

And Daniel's came too. We wrote in the mornings, facing our separate walls in our separate rooms with the whole breathing mountain around us, and we met in the kitchen at one o'clock the way we always had, and we did not show each other the pages, that was our oldest rule, you do not show until it's done, but we could tell. You can tell when the person you love is writing well. They carry it differently. They come to lunch already somewhere else. Daniel came to lunch somewhere else for a year and a half and I was so happy for him I could have cried, and sometimes did, in the parlor, in the red light, for no reason I could have told you except that we had bet everything we had on a photograph of a street and it was *working*.

The blank page was still a wall some mornings. It is always a wall some mornings; that never goes away, and anyone who tells you it

does is selling something. But we had learned, over more than twenty years, how to sit in front of the wall and wait, and mostly the waiting worked, and on the mornings it didn't we would walk down to the river and throw rocks at the water and talk about other people's books, which is what writers do instead of therapy, and come back and the wall would have a door in it again.

That was the thing we were good at, in the end. Not the writing, though we were all right at the writing. The waiting. We were good at the waiting, together, which is the whole marriage if you boil it down, two people good at waiting in the same room.

I'll give you one night of it, because the good years were made of nights like it, and I want you to have one to hold the way I hold it. The first winter, a hard one, the kind the mountains do without apology, and the power went out — it went out often in Alder, the lines were old and the company that should have kept them had gone the way of the coal — and the house went dark and cold all at once, the furnace dead, the only light the blue of the snow in the windows. So we did what you do. We carried every candle and every blanket into the parlor with the colored glass, and we built a fire in the fireplace old Mr. Hollis had surely laid a thousand times, and we got down under the blankets together on the floor in front of it, and the snow came past the colored glass, red and gold and blue, and the fire took the cold out of the room an inch at a time. And Daniel read to me — not his own, he never read me his own until it was done, but somebody else's, a book he loved, in that voice that could make a grocery list sound like scripture — and I lay with my head on his chest and felt each sentence come up through him a half-second before it reached the air, and outside the whole dead beautiful town went white and silent under the snow. And I remember thinking, with my whole body and no words attached to it: this. If it is never once better than this, it has already been enough. I was right. It had already been enough. I had him, and the fire, and the colored snow, and his voice coming up through his chest, and — this is the part that almost never happens to anyone — I knew that I had it while I had it. The happiness did not run through my hands that night. I held it. I am holding it still. It is the one they cannot take, and I have checked, I have checked a thousand times, and it is still here.

I keep circling it. You've noticed. I'm an old woman and I've told this story to myself ten thousand times and I still circle it, the way you circle a cold lake in summer, knowing you're going to get in, putting it off, because the first shock of the water is the end of being dry and you want to be dry a little longer.

So let me stay dry one more sentence. It was good. For two years it was so good that I have spent the nine years since both grateful and ruined for having had it, because now I know what the top of my own life looked like and I was standing on it and I did not feel the air thinning.

The accident was in March. Daniel was driving.

That is where the good years end, and I find I cannot write past the sentence tonight, so I won't. He got the leaves right, up above, so I'll stop on his page and not mine. Tomorrow I'll tell you about the road, and the hospital in the next county, and the kind young doctor, and the little amber bottle they sent us home with, that we were so grateful for, that we set on the kitchen windowsill in the sun like it was nothing, like it was aspirin, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

It was the most ordinary thing in the world. That was what none of us knew yet. That it comes into the house looking exactly like mercy.

II. MERCY

6.

The day it happened was one of the good ones. I need you to know that first, before the road and the tree, because the people who come to a story like this one always arrange the light backward, so that the whole last good day is lit from underneath by what's coming, every ordinary thing already a little bit doomed. It wasn't like that. We didn't have that light. We had the real light, the kind you can't see by, and in the real light it was simply a good day, maybe the best one we'd had in Alder, and I would not give it back even now, even knowing it was the last of its kind.

It was the end of March, a Thursday, nearly two years after we'd come over the ridge with the windows down. The winter had been long the way mountain winters are, not dramatic, just gray and patient and endless, the river running black between white banks, and that Thursday the first real warmth came up the valley and the ice let go of the eaves all morning with a sound like someone setting down glasses in another room. And Daniel had gotten a letter. A real letter, on real paper, from an editor in New York who had read his first book years ago and never forgotten it, asking — not promising, asking — to see the new one when it was ready. After six years of silence. He read it to me in the kitchen three times and then he said, "Put your good dress on, Clare, we're driving to Beckett's."

Beckett's was the one restaurant in the county seat, forty minutes over the mountain, where the tablecloths were cloth and they knew how to cook a trout, and we had been there exactly twice, both times for something that mattered. So I put my good dress on, the dark green one, and Daniel wore the jacket that still fit him in the shoulders, and we drove over the mountain in the long gold light of the first warm evening of the year, and we were happy. I want to spend one more sentence inside that car while it's still whole. The windows were cracked because the warmth was real and we wanted it, and the river ran beside us down in its gorge throwing back the last of the sun, and Daniel drove with one hand and held mine on the console with the other, and we talked about the book, his book, the one the letter wanted, and whether he'd send it in the fall, and what we'd do if — and we let the *if* hang there, the good *if*,

the one we hadn't let ourselves say out loud in years. That is the last thing. The two of us in the green dress and the good jacket with a *good if* hanging in the warm air of the car, driving over a mountain to celebrate a letter.

We had the trout. We had a bottle of wine, one bottle, between us, over two hours, I have done that arithmetic too and it is not the answer, the wine is not the answer, I had two glasses and Daniel had two and a half and we drove home sober under a sky gone from gold to green to the deep used blue of a spring night in the mountains. It had started to rain by the time we left Beckett's, a fine cold rain, the kind that can't decide if it's sleet, and the road home climbs out of the county seat and runs the ridge for a few miles before it drops back down to Alder along the river, and it was up on the ridge, in the dark, in the rain that couldn't decide, coming around the long slow bend by the old church camp, that the deer stepped out.

I have thought about the deer more than I have thought about almost anything. It was a doe. She came out of the dark on the left and she did not run; that is the thing people get wrong; a deer in your headlights does not run, she stops, she turns her whole head and looks at you, and for a quarter of a second you and the deer are the only two living things on earth and you are both completely certain the other one is about to do something and neither of you does. Daniel did what your hands do before your mind is consulted. He turned the wheel away from her, to the right, hard, and the back of the car came loose on the wet road the way a thing comes loose that has been waiting all its life to come loose, and we left the road.

It was not fast. I will say it again because it is the truest and least believable thing: it was not fast. We slid off the right shoulder and down a short grassy slope, and there was a moment, a long impossible moment, where it was almost gentle, where we were just two people in a car going somewhere soft and sideways in the dark, and I had time to say his name, once, calmly, *Daniel,* the way you'd say it to wake him, and then the slope delivered us to the oak.

The oak had been there two hundred years. It took the front of the car on my side and it did not move an inch and it did not care. There was the one enormous flat sound, the sky's door slamming, and the

window blew into glitter, and the whole front of the car on my side came inward to meet me — the dash, the floor, the place where my legs had been — folded back like the lid of something, and then the rain, suddenly, everywhere, loud on what was left of the roof, and the horn going in one long idiot note, and Daniel's voice, Daniel's voice saying my name over and over, *Clare, Clare, Clare,* and me not answering, not because I couldn't hear him but because all of my attention, every part of me, had gone down to my left leg, which was somewhere it should not be, under what used to be the dashboard, and was sending up the first word of a message my body would spend the next year receiving.

7.

We were up on that ridge in the rain for fifty-one minutes before anyone came. I know it was fifty-one minutes because Daniel, who could not turn his body, could move his left hand, and he found his phone in the door pocket, and he called, and the dispatcher stayed on with him, and afterward they told us the time of the call and the time the truck reached us, and I have kept those two numbers the way you keep things that have no use.

Alder has a volunteer fire company and a single ambulance that lives behind the old hardware store, and the men who drive it have day jobs, and they came as fast as men can come who have to first leave their suppers and their couches and drive to the station in the rain. Fifty-one minutes. In the city an ambulance is a sound you resent, a thing that wakes you. Out here it is a prayer with a long way to travel.

So we waited, and I am going to tell you about the waiting, because it was the first of the things we shared that no one outside will ever credit as anything but horror, and it was horror, and it was also ours, and I have never been able to lay it down. Daniel could not reach me with his body — his chest was wrong, every breath was a knife, I could hear it in him, a wet catch at the top of each one — but he could reach my hand, and he did, across the broken console, through the cold rain coming in where the roof had opened, and he held it, and he talked to me. He did not tell me it would be all right. That is one of the ten thousand things I loved him for and did not know to count until later: in the worst moment of our lives he did

not insult me with *it's going to be all right.* He talked to me about the book. He talked to me, in the dark, in the rain, with his ribs broken and my leg crushed and the horn finally dying into silence and the cold coming up through everything, about the ending of the novel the letter wanted, which he had not figured out, and he figured it out aloud, to keep me with him, to keep us both on this side of the dark, and I held his hand and I listened and I put in a word here and there when I could find the breath, and somewhere up the slope, at the top, where the headlights still pointed uselessly into the rain, the doe came back. I saw her. She stood at the top of the slope and looked down at what we had done to keep from touching her, and then she turned, unhurried, and was gone, and I did not hate her and I do not hate her now. She was doing what she was for. We were all just doing what we were for, out there in the rain, waiting for the men to leave their suppers.

8.

They took me away from him first, and that was the second thing, the splitting, and it frightened me more than the pain.

My leg was what they call an open break — the bone had come through — and the big hospital that could fix it was more than an hour away by road, too far, so they sent the helicopter. I had never been in a helicopter. I want to tell you I remember the flight, the lights of the valley, something beautiful to put there, but the truth is they had given me something by then, into the back of my hand, the first of the medicine, the very first, and the flight is gone, and the next thing I have is white light and a voice asking me my name and the strange fact that I could not feel the leg that an hour before had been the entire world. That was the medicine. The first mercy. It did not fix anything. It stood between me and the thing, the way, I would learn, it always does, and in that first hour it was the kindest thing that had ever happened to me, and I have to hold that memory and the nine years that followed in the same two hands and not drop either, which is the work, which is the whole of the work.

Daniel came the long way, by road, by ambulance, an hour behind me, and so for the worst night of our lives we were in two different buildings in two different counties, each not knowing if the other was alive, and I have come to think that the drug knew its business

from that first night: it had already begun to teach us that the unbearable thing is to be apart in it, and the bearable thing, the almost sweet thing, is to be in it together.

I will tell you what they did to us, plainly, because you should know what the body pays, and because the people who tell these stories usually skip from the crash to the needle as if the year between them were an intermission, and that year was not an intermission, that year was where it happened, in the slow daylight, with everyone being kind.

My leg they first held together from the outside, with a frame of metal rods standing off the skin and steel pins running down through the flesh into the bone, to keep the broken pieces still until the swelling went down. Then, a week later, a surgeon I would never meet opened the leg along its length and laid a steel rod down the hollow center of the big bone and closed it over, and fixed the cracked ring of my pelvis with a flat plate and a row of screws, and that is the metal I still carry, that still wakes in the cold, that the airport machines still find. They told me not to put any weight on that side for ten weeks. Ten weeks. A body is not built to be told that. You do not know, until you are told you may not stand on your own leg, how much of being a person is simply standing on your own legs.

Daniel they could do less for, which was somehow worse. You cannot cast a rib. His three broken ribs they could only wrap and wait on, and the waiting was dangerous — a person whose every breath hurts begins, without meaning to, to breathe shallow, and the bottom of the lungs goes still and wet, and that is how the quiet pneumonias start that kill people the crash didn’t. So they gave him a small plastic thing to breathe into, with a float you had to lift with your own breath, ten times an hour, all day, each breath a knife, to keep himself alive by hurting himself on purpose, and I will never forget the sound of it from the next bed once they finally put us in the same room, the slow suck and the little rattle of the float, my husband hurting himself ten times an hour to stay. His right wrist, the writing wrist, they fixed with a small plate and two pins and a cast. And his back — the deep injury, the one that mattered — one of the soft cushions between the bones of his spine had been shoved

out of place in the crash and was pressing on the big nerve that runs down into the leg, and that one they could not cut out and could not set and could not wrap. That one, they said, might settle on its own with time. It never did. That was the one that never let him go, the low constant speaking of it, the thing that meant that for the rest of his life there would always be a reason, a real reason, an honest reason, to reach for the amber bottle. The crash gave him a pain with no end, and then the world gave him the thing that ends pain, and told him it was medicine, and it was medicine, and that is not a trick anyone played on us. That is just how it goes. That is the thing itself.

9.

They brought us home in May, to a house we could not climb.

The turret room with the best window was two flights up and might as well have been on the moon. So we lived in the front parlor, the one with the colored glass, that whole spring and summer — they wheeled in two narrow rented beds and set them side by side where the dining table had been, and that is where we were, the two of us, in the red and gold light that came through the glass in the late afternoon and lay across the floor like something spilled, which Daniel had loved on the first day and which we now watched travel across the boards for hours because there was very little else we could do.

I am going to tell you about those months the way they were, which is not the way Ruth tells them. Ruth — Daniel's younger sister, who drove down from Ohio when she heard and stayed six weeks and was, I want to say clearly, magnificent, who cooked and cleaned and drove us the hour to our appointments and emptied the things that have to be emptied when two people cannot walk — Ruth remembers those months as the beginning of the horror, the first chapter of the thing that took her brother. And she is not wrong. The horror did begin there. But that is not what those months *were,* from inside them, and I am the only one left who was inside them, so I get to say.

They were, God help me, tender. They were among the most tender months of our marriage. There is an intimacy in being broken

together that I had no idea existed, that I would not have traded, that I am not sure I would trade now. We had been married nearly thirty years and I thought I knew what it was to be close to a person, and then I learned what it is to help that person do the things a body does not let another person help with, the small humiliating mechanical things, and to have them help you, and to find that there is no humiliation in it at all once you are both far enough down, that it burns off, that what's left when the dignity goes is something better than dignity, something I don't have a good word for even now. We learned each other's bodies the way you learn a language by living where it's spoken. Daniel could not raise his arms, so I washed his hair in a basin, leaning out of my bed into his, both of us swearing and laughing, the water going everywhere. I could not get to the bathroom alone for a long time, and he was the one — ribs and all, hurting himself worse to do it — who got me there, who would not let the visiting nurse do it when he could, because, he said, he was not going to miss the chance to carry me over a threshold again, and he said it as a joke, and it was not a joke, and we both knew it wasn't, and that is the whole of what I mean by the thing I don't have a word for.

And every morning and every evening, there were the amber bottles, lined up now on the mantel over the cold fireplace, his and mine, with the typed labels and the cotton in the top and our own names, and we took what they told us to take, because we hurt, because the man they sent us to, Dr. Prewitt, the one doctor in Alder, told us to, and he was kind, and he was tired, and he had a waiting room full of broken mountain people and forty years of watching them hurt, and he gave us what the hospital had started and what our broken bodies plainly needed, and not one person in this part of the story did a single thing wrong. That is what I most need you to understand before we go on. Everyone was kind. Everyone did the sensible, merciful, correct thing at every step. The nurse was kind and the surgeon was kind and Dr. Prewitt was kind and Ruth was magnificent and Daniel and I loved each other more in that parlor than we ever had in our lives, and all of it, every kindness, every correct and merciful step, was carrying us deeper into the country we would not find our way back out of together. There was no villain. I have looked. For nine years I have looked for

the villain and there isn't one, and that is the worst thing I know about the world, worse than if there were.

10.

Here is Daniel, from the green notebook, a June night in the parlor, the casts off by then but the pain of the back fully moved in, his handwriting its own right-handed self again, going a little downhill toward the gutter.

Everyone has left for the night. Ruth has gone back to Ohio, having saved our lives and refused all thanks. The nurse comes only twice a week now. It is just us again, Clare asleep in the next bed three feet away, and the red light gone from the glass hours ago, and the mountain out there in the dark being patient the way it is always being patient.

The back is bad tonight. I won't describe it; I've been describing it for weeks and the describing has started to bore even me, which is a mercy of its own. I waited as long as I could and then I took what Prewitt gives me, and I have been lying here in the dark waiting for it, and about twenty minutes ago it came, and I have to write this down while it's clean, because I think it is the most important thing that has happened to me since the oak tree, and because I have noticed that I am already a little bit afraid of it, and a man should write down the thing he is afraid of while he can still see it plainly.

It is not that the pain stops. I have said this before and got it slightly wrong, so let me get it right tonight. The pain does not stop. What stops is the pain's dominion. For weeks the pain has been the government of my body — it has set every policy, it decides when I move and how I breathe and whether I can bear to be spoken to — and twenty minutes ago, quietly, without a shot fired, the government fell. The pain is still down there. I can see it, a small deposed thing in the corner, muttering. But it governs nothing now. And into the enormous space where its government used to be, everything else comes flooding — the whole world I'd forgotten was out there past the dirty window of it.

And here is what I did not expect and what I am afraid of. It is not just the pain's government that falls. It is all of them. The whole committee that runs a man — the one that keeps the accounts, the

one that remembers the bad reviews, the one that stands behind my right shoulder at the desk and tells me I am a fraud, the one that has been afraid, quietly, of one thing or another, every single day since I was a boy and did not even know fear had a sound until tonight, when it stopped. They all fall. And what is left, when the whole anxious government of a man is deposed, is a thing I can only call peace, and I am fifty years old and I am ashamed to tell even this notebook that I do not think I have ever felt it before, not once, not on my wedding day, not holding my first book, not any of the days I would have told you were the happy ones. This is the happy one. This quiet. This nothing-wrong. This room with Clare breathing in it and the mountain out there and no government at all.

It is like the moment in deep snow when you stop walking and the whole forest stops with you and you understand that silence is not the absence of sound but a thing in itself, with mass, that you could lean against. It is like the first second after you finally set down a weight you'd been carrying so long you'd forgotten it was a weight and had started to think the ache was just the shape of your own shoulders. It is like — and I'll write this one and then put down the pen and let myself have the rest of it — it is like being held. Just that. Like being held by something that asks nothing and wants nothing and is not even particularly interested in you, that simply holds you the way the dark holds the mountain, and lets you, for an hour, not have to be the one doing the carrying.

Clare takes hers too. We don't talk about it much. We take them at the same time, most nights, without planning to, and we lie here three feet apart in the two little beds in the dark, and I know — I can hear it in how her breathing changes — I know when hers arrives, and she knows when mine does, and we reach across the gap between the beds and hold hands, and we are, for that hour, in the same held place at the same time, two people in the one warmth, and I will tell you the truth because this notebook is the only thing I don't lie to: it is the closest I have ever felt to another human being, and the other human being is my wife of nearly thirty years, and we got there by driving into a tree. I don't know what to do with that. I don't think there is anything to do with it except write it down, and take her hand, which I am going to do now, because I can hear that hers has just come.

So that is where I'll leave us tonight, the way I left us at the end of the first part — on his page and not mine, because he was always better, and because I cannot improve on it and would not try. Two people three feet apart in the dark, holding hands across the gap, in the one warmth, at the top of the second good season of our lives.

We did not know it was a door. We thought it was a room. We thought we had been let, at last, after the oak tree and the metal and the long humbling spring, into a small warm room where nothing hurt and nothing was wrong, and we thought we could come and go from it as we pleased, the way you come and go from a room.

I know what it was now. I have learned its name and its history and what it does to the lock it fits, and I'll tell you all of it, because Daniel would want you to have the real thing under the made-up thing. But I wanted you to feel it first the way we felt it, with no name on it, because if you do not understand that it was the most beautiful room we ever entered, you will not understand anything about why we could not leave it, and you will do what Ruth does, what the world does, what the people at the funeral did with their two hands around mine — you will call it a tragedy and feel sorry for us, and we did not want, either of us, not then and not at the end, to be felt sorry for. We wanted to be understood. That is why I am writing this. That is the only reason.

III. THE GOD WHO WEARS YOUR FACE

11.

It was Daniel who gave it its true name, that summer, over lunch, the way we had handed each other everything interesting for nearly thirty years.

By then we were up on our feet again, more or less. I was on a cane and would be for the rest of my life; the metal in my leg had knit the bone back into something that worked and would never again be innocent. Daniel's ribs had healed and his wrist had healed and only the deep thing in his back was left, the one that had moved in to stay, so that he stood and sat and turned over in the night the careful way of a man who shares his body with a sleeping dog he mustn't wake. We had moved back upstairs. We were writing again — I'll get to how we were writing. And the amber bottles had moved with us, from the parlor mantel to the kitchen windowsill to the drawer in the hall, Dr. Prewitt refilling them each month without my ever quite having to ask, because the back was real and the leg was real and the pain was, I want to keep saying this, real.

Daniel read the way other people breathe, and one afternoon he came to the kitchen at one o'clock already somewhere else, which I had learned years ago to love as the sign that the work was running, and he set down a cold sandwich he wasn't going to eat and said, "Did you know they named it after a god?"

I said named what.

"What we take. The grandmother of it, anyway." And he told me, and I'm going to give it to you the way he gave it to me, because Daniel always wanted the reader to have the real thing under the made-up thing, and because this was the moment the lovely nameless warmth we had been living inside got its name, and a thing with a name is a different thing to live with than a thing without one.

The medicine in our bottles, he said, was a great-grandchild of a single plant. A poppy — the tall kind with the fat green seed-head that bleeds a white milk when you score it. People had known for thousands of years that the dried milk of that one poppy took away pain, and fear, and grief, and gave you, in their place, a warm half-sleep full of good dreams. And a little over two hundred years

ago, a young man in Germany, a pharmacist's apprentice barely out of his teens, had done something nobody had managed before: he had pulled the one pure powerful thing out of all that poppy milk, the white powder at the very heart of the white milk, the thing that did the work. And he had to name it. And he was young, and it was that kind of century, full of poets, so he reached for the oldest story he knew and named his white powder after a god — not a big god, a quiet one, the Greek god of dreams, the one who slips into a sleeper's room at night and stands by the bed wearing the face of someone the sleeper loves, so that the dead come back in dreams, and the far-away come close, and no one wakes alone.

"He named it after the god," Daniel said, turning the cold sandwich in his good hand, lit up, delighted, "who comes to you in the night wearing the face of someone you love. Clare. Isn't that *exactly* it. Isn't that precisely and completely what it does."

I laughed. God help me, I laughed, because it *was* exactly it, and because noticing exactly-it across a lunch table was the whole reason we had moved to the end of the world, and I thought: there he is, there's my husband, lit from inside, finding the true lovely thing in the middle of an ordinary Tuesday. I did not hear the eulogy inside the marvel. He was telling me the name of the thing that was going to kill him and he was telling it as a wonder, the god who wears the face of someone you love, and he was right, that is exactly what it does, that is exactly and precisely and finally what it does — it comes to you wearing the face of everything you love, your work and your wife and the end of your pain, all at once, so that to push it away you would have to push away everything whose face it wears.

That was the last fully happy conversation I can set a date to. I have gone back to it ten thousand times. I would live in it if I could, the kitchen, the mountain in the window, the cold sandwich, my husband delighted by a dead god's name, neither of us hearing the door quietly open behind the word.

12.

Now I'll tell you how we were writing, because if I don't make you believe this part, the rest is just a sad story about weak people, and it was not that, and I did not spend nine years and a marriage learning what it was in order to let you think it was that.

We were writing the best work of our lives.

I can prove it, which is the terrible part. I have the pages. I have read them stone-sober nine years later with the cruelest eye I own, looking for the lie, wanting to find that the warmth had fooled us, that the great stuff was really garbage we'd been too far gone to see — because that would be easier, that would let me file those months under *delusion* and close the drawer. But it isn't true. Some of what we wrote that summer and that autumn is the best either of us ever did. I know good writing; it's the one thing I have never been able to lie to myself about; and it was good.

Here is what the warmth did, and why it is the most dangerous thing I have ever known, more dangerous than the oak tree, because the oak tree only took our bodies. You know the one who stands behind your right shoulder at the desk, whose entire job is to tell you it isn't good enough, it's been done before, you're a fraud, the sentence you just wrote is the one that will finally prove it? Every writer has him. Most people have some version of him at whatever they're trying to do. The warmth sent him out of the room. It didn't argue with him. It just closed the door behind him, gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping child, and for the first time in six years I was alone with the page the way I'd been alone with it at twenty-four, before I knew enough to be afraid.

The words came. For both of us, in our separate rooms, all through that long green summer and into the gold of the fall. We met at one o'clock and we broke the oldest rule we had, the one about not showing until it's done, and we read each other pages in the afternoon light, and the pages were good, and we knew they were good, and we were — I am not going to soften this, I have softened everything else — we were *happy.* We were two real writers having the best season of our lives, and we were having it because every morning we were a little bit not in our right minds, and both of

those facts are true at once, and holding them both at once without dropping either is the whole reason this book exists.

I'll give you one afternoon of it, one real one, because the season was made of afternoons like it, and because I have it still and I want you to have it too. It was late August, the heat finally letting go, and Daniel came into the kitchen at one o'clock not with a cold sandwich this time but with three pages in his hand, and I knew before he said a word, by the way he was carrying his own body — lightly, the way you carry it when you've just set something heavy down. "Read this," he said. "I've lost the place you see it from." Which was a lie; he could always tell; but he wanted to give it to me, and I had been wanting for a week to give him mine. So we broke the oldest rule we had, the one about not showing a word until it's done, the way we broke everything, together.

The pages were about the town. About an old miner who had gone down into the mountain forty winters and been let go at the end of it into a place that no longer needed the thing he had spent his body to bring up.

He stood on Main Street in the long gold evening with the opera house behind him gone to selling other men's furniture, and he understood, the way you understand a death, that the town had only ever been a coat the coal wore — and the coal was gone, and the coat did not know yet that it was empty, and went on standing in the cold in the shape of a man.

I set the pages down and I could not speak, and that was the review, the only one that ever counted for either of us: the silence of the other one with your pages in their lap. He had never written anything that good in his life. I told him so, and then I got my own, the ones I had been afraid of, and he read them at the same table in the same red light and set them down and looked at me and said nothing, and the nothing was the whole of it. Two people at the top of the one thing they had given their lives to, in a kitchen at the end of the world, the mountain in the window, the work coming in through a door that the fear had kept shut for years and that now stood open.

And it came through that door. Not past it — through it. The best work either of us ever did came through the same door, in the same

warmth, that was already, that same gold afternoon, quietly killing us. I have the pages; they are in the drawer three feet from where I am writing this; they are exactly as good as I remember, I have checked, and every time I check I have to take the two things up in my two hands again and not drop either: that it was the warmth that held the door open, and that it was the warmth that was going to close it, on all of it, for good. You cannot take the one without the other. That is the thing the people outside cannot hold, and it is the whole of what I know.

Ruth calls those months the honeymoon. The counselors taught her the word; it's the pretty name they use for the lie at the beginning, the bait on the hook. And I understand why she needs it to have been a lie, because if it was only a lie then her brother was only a victim, and a victim is a clean thing to grieve. But I was *inside* it, and I am telling you from inside it, across nine years and his death: it was not only a lie. It was also the truest work and the closest we ever were. And the thing I cannot forgive, the thing I have written a whole book trying to lay my hand on, is that there was no *seam.* The lie and the truth came through the same door, in the same warmth, wearing the same beloved face. You could not take the one without the other. Nobody can. That is not weakness. That is the design.

13.

The first crack was so small that I only know it was the first because I have had nine years to lay them all in a row and look for where the line begins.

It was the autumn. I was at my desk in the morning, in the red light through the glass, and I reached for the warmth the way I had every morning for months, to send the man behind my shoulder out of the room so I could work — and it worked, but not all the way. He went, but he stood just outside the door now, and I could feel him there, and the words came but they came against a faint resistance, as if through one thin layer of something, and I did the most natural thing in the world, the thing anyone would do, the thing the whole trap is built to make you do: I decided I needed a little more. Not a lot. A little. Because the back pain was worse, I told myself, and it may even have been true, who can ever untangle it, that is the

genius of it again — and I took a little more, and the man went all the way out, and I worked, and I thought nothing of it.

I want to tell you what was actually happening, because Daniel figured it out that same autumn, from a book, the way he figured out everything, and brought it to me at lunch not delighted this time but quiet, turning it over.

The warmth was never a gift the drug added to us. It was a door the body already had. Every one of us is born with our own private supply of something very like it — the body makes its own, in small amounts, and releases it in trickles: the calm after you've been hurt and the hurt starts to ebb, the warmth of being held, the second wind, the quiet after weeping. We have our own, and it is metered out, a drop at a time, exactly as much as a life can bear. What we had been pouring into ourselves every morning was a flood where the body deals in drops — the same key, the same lock, turned a thousand times harder than the body ever turns it.

And the body is not a fool. The body, finding its own lock being thrown wide open every single day by a flood from outside, does the sensible thing, the thrifty thing, the thing it has done for every creature for a billion years: it turns its own supply down. Why keep making your own warmth, why keep the locks oiled and the drops flowing, when a flood arrives every morning from the kitchen drawer? So it turns itself down. It turns itself down a little more each day. And that is why the same amount that lifted us like angels in the spring did a little less by the autumn, and why I needed *a little more* to get back to where I'd been — not because I was weak, not because I wanted more pleasure, but because the floor had quietly moved. The body had been turning down its own lights to match the flood, so that now, underneath the flood, the room was darker than it had ever been before any of this began, and the flood was no longer lifting me to heaven. It was lifting me back up to ordinary. And ordinary, now, was only reachable by flood.

That is the whole thing. That is the entire mechanism, and there is nothing else to it, and it is the saddest machine I know of, and we were already deep inside it before Daniel read it out to me at the lunch table, quiet, turning the book over in his hands, the two of us finally beginning, just beginning, to be afraid.

14.

The night I understood we were not going to be able to just stop, I have never told anyone, and I am going to tell you, and then I am going to stop for tonight, because it still costs me.

It was a Sunday, late fall, and we had decided — lightly, the way you decide to skip dessert — that we'd take the day off from it. Just the one day. To prove we could. We didn't say *prove we could*; we said something easy, we said *let's give our heads a rest,* and we meant it, and we were, I think, still mostly sure it would be nothing.

By the afternoon Daniel was wrong in a way I had no name for. He was restless in his skin. He couldn't sit in his chair, couldn't lie down, couldn't read, which for Daniel was like a fish unable to be in water. He was sweating though the house was cold, and then cold though he was sweating, and his nose ran, and his eyes watered, and he kept yawning these enormous involuntary yawns, and his legs — he kept moving his legs, bending and straightening them, pacing, because, he said, they felt like they wanted to crawl off his body, like there were ants under the bone, and nothing he did made it stop. By evening I wasn't much better. A low grinding dread had come up in me out of nowhere, worse than any fear I'd ever felt because it had no face, no cause, it was just *there,* rising, the exact opposite of the warmth, the warmth turned inside out, and every cell I had was leaning toward the drawer in the hall the way a field of flowers leans at the sun.

We lasted until nearly ten o'clock. I remember the clock. And then Daniel stood up in the middle of the cold bright kitchen, grey-faced, shaking, this brilliant funny gentle man I had loved for nearly thirty years, and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and neither of us said the thing out loud because we didn't have to. We just — both of us, together, without a word, the way we did everything — we went and got the bottles.

And the relief, when it came, twenty minutes later, was not heaven. That's the part nobody tells you. It wasn't heaven anymore. It was just the ants stopping. It was just the dread lifting back to ordinary. It was the flood coming in only high enough, now, to reach the place where we could stand being alive, and we sat in the dark kitchen feeling the horror recede, not lifted, not transported, just *returned,*

just allowed back to zero, and we held hands across the table, and we did not talk about the god who wears the face of someone you love, because we had both just met the face he wears when you try to send him away.

That was the autumn the door locked behind us. We didn’t hear it. You never hear it. That is the one thing every single person who has been through that door will tell you, the one thing they all agree on across every country and every century: there is no click. You are in the warm room, free, coming and going as you please, and then one ordinary Sunday you reach for the door to step out for the day, the way you have a hundred times, and it does not open, and it has not opened since, and you cannot for your life remember which of the hundred times before was the last time it did.

THE JOY PLANT

Step out of the story for a moment, and go back. Not years — thousands of years. Past the cars and the hospitals and the little amber bottles, past the cities, past writing itself, to the far edge of what we can still see at all. The people in this part have no books, because books have not been invented. They have just learned to farm. They live in small settlements of mud and reed around the shores of the warm middle sea and the two rivers east of it, and they have begun, for the first time in the whole life of our kind, to put seeds in the ground on purpose and wait. And one of the first things they plant — older than the wheel, older than the letter A — is a poppy.

We have the seeds. That is how we know. In caves and old graves around the Mediterranean, in Spain and Switzerland and Germany, people have dug up the small hard seeds of this one particular poppy, left by people who lived more than seven thousand years ago, before 5000 BC. In one cave in Spain that they call the Bat Cave, the seed-heads were laid among the dead in small baskets woven of grass, on purpose, and you only bury a plant with your dead when the plant is something more than food.

And we know a little of how they grew it, because the poppy is a patient teacher and has not much changed its habits in all the time since. It is not a hard plant to please. It wants only what the first farmers already had to give — turned ground, full sun, a dry season, a temperate sky — and it pays them back out of all proportion: a tall gray-green stalk, a flower of white or lilac or deep red that opens for a day or two and falls, and then, where the flower was, a fat round head the size of a child’s fist, swelling and ripening from green toward the color of straw. On the shores of the Italian lakes, and in the villages built out over the water on wooden posts in what is now Switzerland, farmers seven and eight thousand years ago grew it in their small plots beside their wheat and their barley, and we have found it there by the handful in the lake-mud under the old house-floors — so much of it, so carefully kept, that it was plainly no

curiosity but a crop, one of the ordinary things a family grew in order to live. They ate the seeds, which are only food and hold no sleep in them at all. And somewhere in those first farming centuries they learned the other thing the head will give you, if you ask it in the right way.

Nobody wrote down why, because nobody yet could. The first people who could write, the Sumerians, between the two rivers, grew it in their fields more than five thousand years ago, and on their clay tablets — the oldest writing of any kind that we have, the first words our species ever set down — they left a name for it. The name, as far as anyone can read it, was *hul gil* [hool GEEL]. The joy plant. The people who read that ancient writing for a living still argue over it, and you should know that; but that is the name that has come down to us across five thousand years, from the first hand that ever wrote anything, for this flower: *joy.* And they wrote down how they took it — scoring the fat green seed-head so the white milk weeps out, and gathering it in the morning, the way you gather anything precious that the night has made.

The way is this, and it has scarcely changed in all the centuries, in any country on earth. You wait until the petals have fallen and the head is full and still green, and in the cool of the evening you take a small blade and score it — a few shallow lines, just through the skin, no deeper — and then you leave it alone overnight. In the dark the wound weeps. By morning the whole head is beaded with a milk gone brown and sticky in the air, and you walk out at first light and gather it, scraping each scored head gentle and clean, and that stooping in the early light from one head to the next is one of the oldest motions our hands still know how to make. Far from those lake-villages, and long after them, on the island of Crete, someone shaped a little clay goddess no taller than your hand and set upon her head a crown of three poppy heads — and carved into the clay of each one a set of shallow cuts, the very slits of the evening scoring, so that across three thousand years and a lost language we can still read what the people who knelt to her knew: this flower, and this small blade, and this gathering in the morning, and that they thought the whole of it holy enough to crown a god with.

After them, everyone. In Egypt they grew whole fields of it in the hot black soil the river laid down each year, and the best of it came from around the southern city of Thebes, and the priests and the healers kept it close; for centuries afterward people still called the finest kind by the name of that one city, the way you might name a wine for its valley. And the Greeks, who gave us so many of our words, gave us this one too: they called the white milk *opion* [OP-ee-on], which only means *the juice* — the sap, the thing that weeps out — and that plain little word, worn smooth by three thousand years of mouths, is the one we still say. Opium. It only ever meant *the juice.*

But the Greeks saw what was under the medicine. They put the poppy into the hands of their gods of sleep, and of night, and of death — the three brothers of oblivion — because they understood that this flower's true gift was a kind of beautiful forgetting. And in Homer's old poem, the oldest story we keep, there is a moment at a sad feast where a woman slips a drug into the wine, a drug that takes away grief and the memory of pain, so that a man could sit and hear how his own brother died and not weep. The Greeks called that drug *nepenthe* [neh-PEN-thee] — it means, simply, *no grief* — and for three thousand years people have read that line and thought: that was the poppy. We can't be sure. But we know the poppy can do exactly that. We know, for certain, that it can take away grief.

And that is the oldest thing about it — older than the needle, older than the law, older than the crisis, older than any name on any bottle. For as long as there have been people, there has been this one flower that takes away pain and fear and grief and leaves a warm forgetting where they were, and for as long as there have been people, people have wanted it, and reached for it, and buried it with their dead. Clare and Daniel, in their parlor, three feet apart in the dark, holding hands in the one warmth — they believed they had found a small, private, modern room that the accident had opened for them alone.

They had walked into the oldest room there is.

IV. THE CHEAPER, NEARER THING

15.

The pills went away the way everything goes away now — not with a decision anyone would own, but with a policy.

Somewhere far above Alder, in rooms we never saw, the people who count things had finally begun to count the dead, and the number had gotten big enough to move, and the thing that moved was the supply. They tightened the rules on men like Dr. Prewitt. They put his prescriptions into a state computer that watched him the way nothing had ever watched him in forty years of watching sick people, and they sent him letters, and they made examples of two doctors a county over, and Dr. Prewitt, who was tired, and kind, and near the end of a long life of being the only one, did the only safe thing left to him. He began, gently, to turn us down.

He did it the right way. That is its own small horror. He did not cut us off at the knees; he sat us down, Daniel and me, in his brown office with the diplomas going yellow on the wall, and he told us the truth, which was that the thing in our bottles had stopped being medicine for us somewhere back in the fall and become something else, and that the kindest thing he could do now was to help us down off it slowly, a little less each month, a long gentle staircase back to the ground. He meant it. He was trying to save us. And every word he said was correct, and I sat there nodding, and the entire time he was talking, some newer, colder part of me that I was only just meeting was doing arithmetic, was counting the pills left in the drawer at home against the days, and was already, before I had even left his office, afraid in a way that had nothing to do with anything he was saying.

Because a gentle staircase is a beautiful idea, and the body does not care about beautiful ideas. The body only knows the floor has moved, and that each lower step is a step down into the ants and the dread and the warmth turned inside out, held there on purpose, by design, for a month at a time. We tried the staircase. I want that on the record too: we tried, for a while, to go down it the way he asked. And it was like being asked to lower yourself into cold water an inch a day and stay there. No one can do it. A few people can do it. We were not among them, and I have stopped being ashamed of that, because I have met the few who can, in the years since, in the

rooms, and they are not better than we were. They are just people the machine happened to let go of. The machine did not let go of us.

So one grey afternoon in the dead of that second winter, with the staircase shaking under us and the dread coming up, a man we knew a little — a good man, a man whose own brother was in it, half the town was in it, you have to understand that about Alder, this was not a dark corner, this was the whole house — this man told Daniel, kindly, the way you'd tell a neighbor where to get his snow tires cheaper, that there was another way to not be sick. Nearer. Cheaper. It came from the same flower, he said, it did the same thing, it was the same warmth; it had just been carried one more step down the same long road from the field to the street. It had a name we both knew, the way you know the name of a city you have sworn you will never have any reason to visit.

Heroin. There. I have written it. It took me until the fourth part of this book to write it, because it took us until the second winter to say it in our own kitchen, and I wanted you to come to it the way we did — not as the thing this was always going to be about, not as the monster on the poster, but as the cheaper, nearer thing, offered kindly by a decent man on a grey day, that did the same thing the medicine did, that we already could not live without, and that was now the only door left in a room we could not get out of.

16.

I am not going to tell you how. I want to be very clear about that, here, at the worst threshold in this book. There is a way these stories get told where the crossing over becomes a kind of dark recipe, where the reader leans in, and I will not do it, not because I am protecting you but because there is nothing on the other side of that leaning-in that is worth one single thing, and because the how was never the point. The how is the least interesting thing about the worst day of your life. What matters is the line, and that we crossed it, and that we crossed it together.

Because there was a line. We had one. Everyone in it has one, some last thing they swear they will never do, the thing that in their own private ranking is where the real addicts are and they are not, and ours was the obvious one, the one with the needle in it, the one that

turns *us, two writers who had an accident* into the thing on the poster, and we had both, without ever discussing it, drawn that line in the same place and promised ourselves privately we would die on the right side of it.

We did not die on the right side of it. We crossed it on a Tuesday, in our own bathroom, in the house we had bought from a photograph, and we crossed it together, and I am going to tell you the one thing about that day that I have never been able to make anyone on the outside understand, the thing Ruth cannot hear without her face going to pieces, the thing that is the whole reason I am writing this book instead of the one they wanted me to write.

I was not alone.

That is the thing. That is the only thing. On the worst day of my life, the day I became the thing I had sworn I would never become, I was not alone, because the person I loved most in the world was there, crossing the same line at the same moment, his hands shaking exactly as much as mine, and we looked at each other across that bathroom with a shame so total that there was, strangely, nothing left to hide, and in the ashes of all our pride there was this one thing standing, this one thing the fire couldn't touch: we were still together. We had not let it make us lie to each other. We had not hidden it from each other, used behind each other's backs, built the separate secret lives that it builds in everyone else, the lies that are the real thing that kills a marriage, worse than the drug. We had gone down into hell, but we had gone down holding hands, out loud, in front of each other, keeping nothing back, and I will tell you across nine years and his grave: that is not nothing. The world says it is nothing, the world says it is only two people destroying themselves, and the world is standing outside the bathroom door and cannot see that inside it there were two people who, even there, even then, at the absolute floor of their lives, refused to be alone in it. Refused to let even this be a thing they did apart.

I don't expect you to agree with me. I expect you to be Ruth. But I was there and Ruth was not, and I am telling you what was in that room besides the horror, and it was love, it was our same stubborn thirty-year love, down there at the bottom with us, still holding on,

still refusing to let go of the one hand it had held the whole way down.

17.

After that, time changed shape, and I'll tell it fast, because it went fast, because that is the other thing nobody warns you: the beginning takes years and the end takes months.

Our days, which had belonged to the work, began to belong to the clock. Not our clock — its clock. The day was no longer morning and afternoon and evening; it was the stretch after, when you were well and could almost pretend, and the longer stretch before, when the sickness started to come up again and the whole world narrowed to the one task of holding it off. We wrote less. Then we wrote badly. Then — and I made myself look at this, sober, later, it is the hardest page in the drawer — we wrote the pages that we could no longer tell were bad. The man behind the shoulder had not just been sent out of the room; the room itself was gone. There was no one left to tell us the work had stopped being good, because the part of us that knew good from bad was the same part that was now fully occupied, every waking hour, with the clock. The second books, both of them, the ones we had come to Alder to write, the ones the letter from New York had asked for — they stopped. Not dramatically. They just quietly stopped being written, the way a stream stops in a drought, no event, just less and less until one day you notice the bed is dry.

I can give you the afternoon I understood it, because it had one, the way the good things had their afternoons. Daniel came into the kitchen at one o'clock with pages in his hand — the same hour, the same hand, as that August day with the three pages in the gold light. He gave them to me the old way. And I read them, and the life had gone out from under them: his rhythm was still there, the shape of his sentences was still there, but it was a man playing himself from memory, the bones of the thing with the warmth drained out. In August I had set his pages down unable to speak, and the silence had been the best thing I owned to give him. I set these down into the same silence, and we both heard what it meant this time, because by then we read each other's silences the way you read weather — and this one did not mean *it is that good.* It meant *it is*

gone. He took the pages back, gently. He did not ask me to say they were good. That was the one wall that never came down between us, in any of the fires: we did not lie to each other about the work, not ever, not even then, not even to spare each other the look on the other one's face. So we didn't. We stood in the ordinary one-o'clock light and let the truth be in the room with us — that the thing we had come to the end of the world to do, the thing we had wrecked our bodies and were selling our house to keep doing, had quietly stopped; and that, as with every good thing we ever had, we had not known the last day of it was the last day while we were standing in it.

The money went the way the writing went. First the savings, then the little that the first books still earned, then the things — I sold my grandmother's ring, Daniel sold the first editions he'd spent his life finding, we sold the good car and drove a bad one, and then we started, slowly, to sell the house out from under ourselves, a room at a time, the way you'd burn the furniture to keep warm. The house we had bought from a photograph. The turret with the best window. All of it, going, to feed the one thing, and the terrible arithmetic of it was that it was never enough and never would be, because the floor kept dropping, because that is what the floor does.

And all around us, Alder was doing the same thing. That is the part the people far away never see, the part that made our private ruin feel less like a sin and more like weather. We were not freaks in a healthy town. We were one house on a street where it was happening in half the houses. The quiet patient line at the pharmacy that Daniel had joked about our first week — we understood it now; we *were* it. There were funerals. There were so many funerals that the one funeral home put in a second viewing room. The young men went first and then it stopped being only the young men. The church that had been for sale took itself off the market because it turned out there was work for a church after all, just not the work it had wanted. Grandmothers were raising their grandchildren up and down our road because the generation in the middle was gone or going. Alder had given the world coal for a hundred years, had sent its mountains away one trainload at a time to keep the country's lights on, and when the coal was done the

country had sent back, in exchange, this — the cheaper, nearer thing, the warmth carried one step too far down the road — and the town was dying of it with the same stubborn, uncomplaining, flinty grace it had done everything else. I loved Alder. I love it still. It is the only place that never once made me feel like a lesson. It was too busy being in it with me.

Ruth came. Of course Ruth came, the second winter, and she did not come gently — she had stopped being gentle, which was its own kind of love. She had done the reading and gathered the pamphlets and found the plain brick building three hours north and called them and learned what it cost, and she sat us down at our own kitchen table, the two of us on one side and her on the other, and she laid all of it out, the place and the beds and the money she would somehow find, and then she did the thing I had never once seen her do: she begged. Ruth is not a woman who begs. *Daniel,* she said, *you are my brother, I have known you longer than she has* — and she looked at me when she said it, not cruelly, only stating the plain arithmetic of a life — *and I am watching you both die in this beautiful falling house, and there is a door, I have found the door, please, please walk through it.*

And here is the thing she could not see, the thing that is the whole of this book. She thought she was looking at two people drowning, and she was right, we were. But she thought it meant we were each drowning, the way a person drowns, alone — that if she could only get us to the boat we would each, separately, be hauled out and saved. She could not see that we were not two people drowning. We were two people drowning together, holding on to each other in the water, and the holding-on was the one thing we had left that was still entirely ours, still unspoiled, still good — and that what she was asking, when she asked us to be saved, was to let go of each other and be saved one at a time, by strangers, on separate halls. She was offering to save our lives at the price of the only thing left in them we still wanted, and she did not know that was the price, because from where she sat there was no price at all. That is the whole distance between the inside of a thing and the outside of it, and I have never once, in all the years since, been able to carry a single person across it.

We said no. We said it kindly. We said the place sounded good and that we would think hard about it — which was the first lie either of us had told anyone in the whole long fall, and it was to her, to the one person trying hardest to save us, and I knew the moment it left my mouth that we had crossed something. The lying had never been part of it, not between us and not to the people who loved us. Now it had started, and it had started with Ruth, because that is exactly where the thing always makes you start: it knows, the way it knows everything, that the quickest way to keep you is to teach you to lie first to the ones who would take you from it. That was how I knew we were near the end — not by anything in our bodies, but by the lying, and by the way the ring had quietly closed down to just the three of us now, him and me and the thing, alone together in the falling house.

Here is Daniel, from the blue notebook, that same winter — a page I did not find until after, when his were the only voice left in the house.

I found this town. I want that written down in my own hand while I still have a hand that writes, because I can feel that coming too. I found the photograph. I turned the laptop around. I said look at this. Every road that led here, I was the one driving — the one on the map and the one in the rain, both of them — and I lie awake doing the sum a man in my position does at three in the morning, which is this: if I had not found Alder, if I had not been at the wheel, if I had not turned it away from the deer, she would be in the city tonight, whole, writing, afraid of nothing worse than a bad review. I did this to her. That is the sum. It is correct. There is no line in it I can cross out.

And then her hand comes across the gap in the dark — she is never as asleep as I think — and finds mine, and she says nothing, because she knows the sum as well as I do and knows there is no arguing me out of it at this hour. She just holds on. And the holding-on is her way of saying the one thing that is also true and that I can never quite believe at three in the morning and always believe again by light: that she is not a thing that was done to. That she came too. That by her own stubborn choice we are in this the same amount, exactly, down to the gram — and that the worst thing

I could do to her now, worse than the photograph, worse than the wheel, would be to decide up here alone in the dark, on her behalf, that she is only something I ruined. She will not let me keep that one. She reaches across every single night and takes it back out of my hand. I do not know what I ever did to earn being kept from my own worst arithmetic by a hand across a gap. But I did something, once, and it is the only thing I am sure I got all the way right.

And yet. I will set this down one time and never again, because a man should look at the worst thing in him at least once in his own hand. There is a kind of love that stays and holds the hand across the gap. And there may be another kind, a harder one I have never been strong enough for, that would find a way to take its hand away for good — so that the other one could finally climb out of the water, since climbing out together is the one thing we have proven, over and over, we cannot do. Some nights I think the most loving thing left in me is the one thing I am too much of a coward to do. Then the grey light comes, and she makes that small sound a sentence makes when it finally arrives in the next room, and I am so glad I am a coward that I could weep. But the thought has learned the way to the house now. It comes most nights. I let her hand be the thing that sends it home, and one day her hand will not be here, and I do not know what I will do then.

18.

Daniel went first, the first time, on a night in the early spring, almost exactly two years after the oak tree.

I was in the next room. I want to be accurate: I was in the next room, writing, or holding a pen over paper, which was what writing had become. And the house was quiet in a way I had learned, without knowing I'd learned it, to be afraid of, and I went to find him, and he was in the bathroom, on the floor, and his lips were the wrong color and his skin was the wrong color and he was not making the sound a person makes, the sound you never notice until it stops, the small sound of a person breathing.

I knew what it was. Everyone in Alder knew what it was by then; the town had learned this the way other towns learn CPR. It is the quietest death there is. It does not thrash. The warmth that takes

away pain and fear and grief takes away, at the end, if you ask it for too much, the body's oldest instruction, the one that runs underneath everything, the one that says *breathe* — it just reaches down and switches off the breathing, gently, the way it switched off everything else, the way it switched off the fear and the critic and the pain, no drama, no struggle, the kindest killer there is. His body had simply, quietly, forgotten to breathe.

There was a kit in the house. By then there was a kit in every house in Alder, the little box with the spray in it that the county handed out at the library and the gas station and the church that was a church again, the thing that reaches in and tears the warmth off the lock, all at once, and gives the body back its oldest instruction. I had never used it. My hands knew how anyway; the town had taught us all, at kitchen tables, the way an older time taught people to deliver a baby or put out a chimney fire, because the help was fifty-one minutes away and you were the help. I used it. And I did the breathing for him, my mouth on my husband's cold mouth on the bathroom floor of the house we were selling a room at a time, and I breathed for him until the thing in the spray reached the lock and tore the warmth off it, and he came back — he came back the terrible way they come back, all at once, sick and shaking and furious and alive, dragged up out of the kindest death and back into the ants and the dread and the cold tile, and the first thing he did, my gentle funny brilliant husband, the first thing he did on being hauled back from the dead, was weep, because I had brought him back into the one thing he had, for a few painless minutes, finally gotten to put down.

That is the night we decided to get clean. Not the next morning, when the resolve is cheap. That night, on the floor, both of us shaking, him weeping and me holding him and the little spent spray rolling away across the tile — that night, in the worst hour we had yet reached, we decided we were going to try to live. Together, the way we had done everything. We were going to go and get the thing torn off our locks on purpose, in a building made for it, and find out if there was anything left on the other side of the warmth, anything at all, that was worth staying for.

I didn’t know yet that the other side of the warmth was the hardest country we would ever cross. I didn’t know that getting the drug out of us would be worse than any day the drug had ever given us, that the body charges interest, that it keeps every drop of warmth it ever lent you in a ledger and calls the whole debt in at once. I didn’t know that the bravest thing Daniel ever did, braver than the accident, braver than the writing, would be to walk into that cold on purpose, holding my hand. And I didn’t know — how could I have known — that we would both make it through that cold, all the way through, to the dry ground on the far side, and that the cold would not be the thing that took him.

But that is the next part, and it is the hardest one to write, and I am not going to start it tonight.

THE JOY PLANT

Step out of the story again, and come forward — a long way forward from the Bat Cave, but still two hundred years back from us. England, the early part of the eighteen-hundreds. A world of coal smoke and horses and candlelight, of poets and consumption and long cold winters. And here is the thing you have to understand about that world to understand what happens in it: nobody knew. The idea that this flower could take hold of a person and not let go — the thing we now call addiction — had not yet been named or understood. And so the dried milk of the poppy, in a form called laudanum [LAW-duh-num], which is only the milk dissolved in alcohol, was sold openly, cheaply, legally, to anyone, in every kind of shop — by chemists, yes, but also by barbers and confectioners and grocers and the man who sold you your writing paper — and it was given for everything: for a cough, for a headache, for sleeplessness, for a sour stomach, for a crying child. It was the aspirin of its age, and more than the aspirin, and no one thought it any stranger than aspirin.

And a writer wrote it down. In 1821 a small brilliant ruined Englishman named Thomas De Quincey published a book with a title that told you exactly what it was: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater.* He was the first person to write honestly, from the inside, about the whole of it — and the structure of his book is the thing I want you to see, because it is the structure of this one, written two hundred years before this one. He divided it into two parts. The first he called *The Pleasures of Opium.* And the second he called *The Pains of Opium.* He told, first, the truth almost no one will tell you — that it was wonderful, that it expanded the mind and sweetened the music and made the grey world glow, that he took "happiness," he wrote, in liquid shape — and then he told the other truth, the nightmares, the ruin, the horror that came for the bill. The pleasures, and then the pains. In that order. Always in that order.

He was not alone. His friend Coleridge, one of the great poets of the language, dreamed the poem “Kubla Khan” whole, in an opium sleep, the images rising up before him, he said, “as things,” real as furniture — and woke and began to write it down, and got only a little way before a man knocked at the door, the famous “person from Porlock,” on business, and by the time Coleridge got back to the desk the rest of the dream had closed over like water, and the greatest poem he never finished stays a fragment to this day. And the same Coleridge wrote another poem, years later, out of the other half, out of the trying-to-stop, and called it “The Pains of Sleep,” and in it he wrote of a “soul-stifling shame.” The dreams, and then the shame. The pleasures, and then the pains. Two hundred years ago, by the best writers of their age, the whole of it already set down.

Clare and Daniel believed, that golden summer, that they had stumbled onto a private secret — that the warmth helped the work, that it opened the door the fear kept shut. They had stumbled onto nothing. They had walked into a room where the writers were already sitting, had been sitting for centuries, De Quincey and Coleridge and a long line of them stretching back and forward, every one of them having found the same door and written the same two chapters in the same order. There is nothing new under the warmth. There is only the pleasures, and then, always, in that order, the pains.

V. THE COLD

19.

Ruth found the place, because Ruth found everything, and because by then we could not have found our own shoes.

It was a plain brick building three hours north, past the last of our mountains and out into the flat part of the state where the land gives up being beautiful and just gets on with being useful. Not one of the places you see in the magazines, with the horses and the infinity pool and the price that tells you the people there have something left to protect. This was the other kind, the kind for people who have nothing left, a county-and-charity place with linoleum floors and fluorescent light and a smell of institutional soap that I can still bring back behind my eyes, and I have never in my life been so grateful for an ugly building. Ruth paid what little it cost with money she did not have and has never once mentioned, and she drove us up there herself, the two of us in the back seat of her old car like children, sick already because we had made ourselves wait, holding hands, saying almost nothing, watching our mountains flatten out behind us.

And at the door they told us they would have to separate us. Men on one hall, women on another; that was the rule, it was a sensible rule, it was for everyone’s good. And I watched something happen to Daniel then that I had not seen through the whole long fall — not when the pills were cut off, not in the bathroom with the needle, not even on the floor coming back from the dead — I watched my husband, grey and shaking and barely able to stand, draw himself up to his full height and become, for one last time, the man who had stood up in a seminar room thirty years before and told a roomful of strangers that my one hidden sentence was the only honest thing in the story. He told them, quietly, that we had come this far together and we were not going to do this part apart; that if being apart was the price of their help we would turn around and go home and die in our own house, together, which was a real offer and they could hear that it was real; and that whatever they thought their rule was for, there was nothing they could protect us from in there that was worse than being alone in it.

They were good people. Overworked, underpaid, good people who had heard every kind of plea a sick person can make and had

learned to say no to all of them. And they said yes to us. They bent their rule and they put us in a small room at the end of a hall with two narrow beds, side by side, and I want you to notice, because I did not notice until years later, that we ended as we had begun after the oak tree: in two narrow beds, side by side, in a room that was not ours, about to go through the worst thing a body can be asked to do, together.

20.

I am going to tell you about the cold, now, because the author of my life owes it to you, and because everyone who tells these stories skips it or dresses it up, and it should be told once, plainly, by someone who was in it, so that you understand what it costs to come back, and so that you never again hear someone say *they just need to want it enough* without wanting to put your hand over that person's mouth.

Here is what the body does when you finally take the warmth away.

Remember that the body had turned its own supply down, down, down, to match the flood. Remember that it stopped making its own, let its own locks rust, because why keep the lights on when the sun comes up in the kitchen drawer every morning. Now take the flood away. All at once, or near enough. And the body is left in a house where it has unscrewed every one of its own bulbs, in the dark, with no sun coming, and it panics, and it is a panic that has nowhere to go but out through every door the body has.

The ants came first, the way they had on that first Sunday, except now they did not stop. In the legs, in the arms, under the skin and then somehow under the bone, a crawling that no position could ease, so that Daniel and I lay in our two narrow beds and could not be still, could not stop moving our legs, kicking slowly at the sheets all night like two people running very slowly in their sleep toward something that never got closer. That is where the old ugly phrase comes from, the one people use lightly, *kicking the habit* — it is not a metaphor. You kick. For days. Your legs do it without you.

Then the cold, which is the thing it is named for, the deep true cold that has nothing to do with the temperature of the room, a cold that comes up out of the center of you as if the furnace that runs a

human being had been let go out, so that you shake, not shiver, shake, your teeth going, your whole body clenched and juddering, and the sweat pouring off you at the same time, soaking the sheets, so that you are freezing and drenched at once and there is no blanket on earth that reaches it.

There is a name for this part older than any clinic, and it is as plain and as ugly as the thing it names. The skin goes into revolt. It pulls itself up into gooseflesh and will not come back down, hour after hour, every hair on your body standing on end, the skin crawling as though something were moving along underneath it, and you are cold the way meat is cold — and that is where the old light phrase comes from, the one people say when they mean they quit a thing all at once. Cold turkey. It is not a joke. It is a description. You lie there with the gray plucked gooseflesh of a cold bird on a counter, and you understand, somewhere far back behind the pain, that your own body has stopped being the place you live and become a thing that is happening to you.

And the body, having decided to empty itself, empties itself from every door it has, at once, for days. I am not going to dress this up, because dressing it up is the lie, and because the people who most need to hear it are the ones who believe this is a question of willpower. You are sick from both ends long past the point where there is anything left to give up, heaving over nothing, the body spending its last strength trying to turn itself inside out to flee a poison that is not in your stomach and never was — that is in the emptied lock of every cell, where no heaving can reach it. You foul yourself. There. I have written the thing that is in none of the movies. Two grown writers who had spent their lives agonizing over the right word lay in a clean bright room in their own sweat and filth, unable past a certain depth to get up in time, and unable past a certain depth to care, and *dignity* is the word the comfortable invented so they could look away from exactly this, and I am not going to let you look away from it, because it is true, and it happened to us, and we were not weak and we were not bad and it happened anyway.

And holding the whole of it open, underneath everything, is the sleeplessness. Not tiredness; there is no word small enough and

none large enough. You do not sleep for days — not an hour, not ten minutes; the one mercy the body hands to every other suffering creature on earth is the one it withholds from you, precisely when you would trade your soul for it — and a mind held awake that long in that much pain begins to come apart along its seams. Time stops being a line and becomes a room you are locked inside, one endless unmoving three-in-the-morning, and the corners of the room begin to do things corners should not do, and you hear things moving in the pipes, and you know with a flat terrible clarity that you are losing your mind, and that there is no bottom to this, and that it has always been this way and always will be. That is the dread, the warmth turned all the way inside out — a horror with no object, a certainty pressing on every single cell that something unbearable is happening and will never stop. It is the body's own grief for the thing it has lost, which it experiences, which it cannot help but experience, as the end of the world. And there is no sane watcher left anywhere inside you to lean down and say *this will pass.* Nothing in you believes it will pass. Every cell you own is certain, with a certainty that has nothing to do with thinking, that this is simply what being alive is now, that it is what you are owed, and that you brought it on yourself.

And it does not rise to a peak and break. That is the thing I need the comfortable to understand before anything else. It is not a bad night that a dawn ends. It is not even a bad week in the way a bad week keeps its worst day in the middle and eases after. It comes in waves with no crest, each one worse than the one before, for days without number, so that every hour you are certain you have finally struck the floor, the very worst a living body can be made to feel — and the next hour reaches calmly down past that floor and finds a lower room, and then a lower one. And the whole time, the entire time, there is a door. You know exactly where the door is. It is a phone call away and has always been a phone call away, and behind it now is not even heaven, not even pleasure — only the ants stopping, only the plucked skin lying back down, only permission, at last, to sleep — and the one thing you must do to open it is be weak for a single second, and the whole universe has narrowed to that door and that second, hour after hour after hour after hour. And the people outside, the comfortable ones, the ones who have never in

their lives wanted anything the way every cell of your body is at that moment wanting this, say: *they just need to want it enough*. As if wanting were the thing you were short of. You have never wanted anything the way you want to open that door, and the not-opening of it, one second at a time, for days, with your mind coming apart and your body turning inside out and no sleep and no floor and no end you can believe in — that is the hardest and least-thanked thing a human being is ever asked to do, and most people cannot do it, and I have stopped, forever, thinking one inch less of the ones who cannot.

And we went through it three feet apart.

That is the part I have to make you feel, because it is the whole book again, here, at the bottom of the bottom. I lay in that cold and shook, and three feet away my husband lay in the same cold and shook, and we were both of us as low as a living body can go, stripped past dignity, past language some of those hours, two animals in a bright ugly room sweating and kicking and sick — and we could see each other. That is the thing. We were not alone in it. When the dread came up in me so hard that I made a sound I had never made before, I would feel, through the cold, his hand come across the gap between the beds and find mine, his hand shaking as hard as mine, no comfort in it in the ordinary sense, no warmth, two freezing shaking hands gripping each other in the dark — and it was everything. It was the difference between the two things it is possible to be in that cold. There is going through it alone, and there is going through it in the sight of the one person who loves you, who is in the identical cold, who looks at you across three feet of linoleum with their own eyes streaming — not weeping, your eyes simply stream in the cold, it is one of the body's thousand doors thrown open, but it looks like weeping and after a while it becomes weeping because how could it not — and says nothing, because there is nothing to say, and does not look away. He did not look away from me, in the worst of it, and I did not look away from him, and I have come to believe that this, exactly this, two people refusing to look away from each other at the absolute floor of what a person can suffer, is as close as human beings are allowed to get to one another. Closer than the wedding. Closer than the good work. Closer than the warmth, which was only ever a counterfeit of

this, the thing the god wears the face of. We did not hold each other through the cold because it felt good. Nothing felt good. We held each other through the cold so that neither of us would have to be the only one who had seen the bottom. And when it was over — and it does end, that is the one kindness, the body cannot keep it up forever, after some days the furnace relights and the ants recede and you sleep, finally, a terrible gray sleep, and wake emptied out and alive — when it was over, we had seen each other all the way to the bottom and all the way back, and there is no word in the language for what that does to a love. Ruth, who had never been to the bottom, called it codependency, later, when she was frightened for me. I have thought about her word for nine years. It is a good word, a careful clinical word, and it is standing a very long way outside the room.

Let me tell you the thing her word cannot reach, the thing I saw from inside the room that no word thrown from the hallway will ever touch. There was an hour — the third night, I think, though time had long since come loose — when I surfaced up out of my own sickness and looked across the gap and saw Daniel’s face while he did not know he was being seen. He had gone somewhere past knowing. And what I saw was not bravery and was not endurance; it was my husband afraid, purely, the way a small child is afraid, every mask a grown man wears burned off him, even the last one, even the one he had always kept on for me — and I understood that I was looking at the thing a person actually is under all of it, the small frightened animal at the very bottom of the self that we spend our whole lives dressing and hiding and keeping even from the ones we love most. I saw all the way down to his. And the gift of that ugly room, the gift I would not trade for a safe and separate life, is that at the same hour he was seeing all the way down to mine. We were each the only witness there will ever be to the other one’s absolute bottom. And having seen it — having seen the other with every last mask gone, and stayed, and not looked away, and not left — we never once after had to carry the question that every other human being carries quietly to the grave, which is whether they would still be loved if they were ever wholly seen. We had been wholly seen. We had stayed. You can call that codependency, if you are standing

in the hallway. From inside the room it has another name, and the name is the whole of what two people are for.

I'll give you the one hour I have never told anyone, because it is the floor under the floor, and if I am going to keep you in the cold with us you should see the true bottom of it.

It was the fourth night — or what I was still calling night, though the dark and the light had long since stopped meaning anything. We had been past speech for a long time by then. And somewhere in the worst of that hour a sound began to come out of Daniel that I had never heard from him in all our years, not in the car on the ridge, not on the bathroom floor — a low sound with no words in it, the sound a body makes when it has finally run out of every other thing it owns. And I lay three feet away and could not go to him. I could not get up. I could barely turn my head. I could only lie there and listen to the man I had loved my whole life make that sound into the dark, and I understood, for the first time, that there is a kind of suffering so far down that love cannot reach in and lift it out — that all love can do, at the very bottom, is be in the room.

So I did the only thing I had left. I turned my head the last few inches toward him, which cost me everything I had, and I made the sound back. I did not say his name; I had no name left in me, no words, nothing shaped. I only made the sound back, into the dark, so that his would not be the only one — so that whatever country he was lost in down there, he would hear that someone was in it with him, three feet away, making the same sound, and had not left. And after a while his hand came across the gap the way it always came, shaking as hard as mine, and found mine, and we lay there and made that sound back and forth to each other in the dark, like two animals calling across a distance, which is exactly what we were. It was the most human thing I have ever done. And the most human thing, I learned that night, is not a separate thing from the most animal thing; at the very bottom they are one thing, a living creature in the dark refusing to let another living creature be alone in the dark, and I have never since been able to tell the two of them apart, and I no longer try to.

Here is Daniel on it — not from the cold, because you cannot write in the cold, you cannot hold a pen or a thought in the cold — but

from a week after, when his hand had steadied enough to try, in the blue notebook.

I have spent an hour hunting the words for the thing we just came through, and I have decided there are none, and that this is not a failure in me but a fact about the thing. Language was made by people sitting up — warm, fed, safe enough to want a name for a thing. It was not made for the floor of the cold. There is no word down there, because nobody who is down there has a word, and nobody who has a word is still down there. So all I can set down is this, and it is not a description, it is only a flag planted on a country I barely came back from: it was worse than dying. I have been near enough to dying now to set the two of them side by side, and dying was the kind one. Dying was warm. Dying came wearing Clare's face. This was the other thing, the true opposite thing — every door the body has, thrown open at once onto winter. And the only reason I am sitting here on this side of it with a pen in my hand is that when I was all the way down at the bottom, with no word and no name and no self left in me, there was a sound in the dark three feet away, and the sound was Clare, making it back to me, and I put everything I had left into climbing up the sound until it turned, at the top, back into my wife.

21.

We came home to Alder in the late spring, clean, into a house we had half sold and a life we had entirely wrecked, and I will tell you the truth about the far side of the warmth, because this is where the real courage was, and where almost nobody looks.

The withdrawal is the famous part. The withdrawal is in all the movies. But the withdrawal is only a week or two, and the body, as I said, cannot keep it up. The hard part, the part that takes the real and endless courage, is the gray that comes after, and stays, and stays. Because the body, which turned its own lights off, does not turn them back on just because you've suffered enough. It turns them back on slowly, grudgingly, over months, over the better part of a year, relearning how to make its own small warmth, its own drops, and until it does, you live in a world with the color drained out of it. Nothing is quite worth doing. Food is fuel. Music is noise that used to mean something. The things that once gave an ordinary

person their ordinary daily reasons — a good meal, a joke, a morning, your wife's face across a table — all of it comes to you through gray glass, at a distance, because the part of you that lights up at being alive has been unplugged and is being rebuilt one wire at a time, and no one can tell you how long, and some mornings you are absolutely certain it will never come back, that you have traded the warmth for nothing, for a gray forever, and that is the morning most people go back. Not in the cold. In the gray. The gray is what kills most of the ones who make it through the cold.

We did not go back. And I want to say clearly, because the whole shape of this book depends on it: those gray months, the hardest and least rewarded of our whole lives, the months of two emptied-out people relearning how to be alive in a half-empty house in a dying town — those months were also ours, also shared, and I do not rank them one inch below the golden summer when the words poured and the warmth lifted us like angels. I know how that sounds. Ruth would weep to hear it. But I have had nine years to weigh these things against each other, every kind of day we were given, and I have found that they do not weigh differently. The summer we wrote like gods and the winter we crossed a line in the bathroom and the week we shook in the cold and the long gray spring we sat at the table unable to feel the sun and got up the next morning and stayed anyway — I will not rank them. They were all us. They were all the one thing, which was a life, shared all the way down and all the way back, nothing held apart, nothing suffered alone. The people outside need there to have been good days and bad days, a honeymoon and a horror, so the story has a shape they can hold. I was inside, and from the inside there was only ever the two of us, going through whatever there was to go through, together. That is the thing I know that they don't. That is the only thing I know that they don't, and it is everything, and it is why I am not sorry, and it is why I can't make them understand, and it is why, in the end, I stopped trying to make them and started trying, instead, to make them *feel* it, which is the only thing a book can do, which is why there is a book.

Slowly, the color came back. The body is faithful, in the end, even to people who have betrayed it; it relit its lights, drop by drop, through that summer, and one morning in August I bit into a peach on the

back porch of our ruined house and it was so sweet and so cold and so entirely, violently *there* that I started to cry, standing up, holding a peach, because I had not tasted anything in a year and here, without any warning, was a peach, and the world had been in it the whole time, waiting, patient as the mountain, for me to be able to taste it again. Daniel came out to see what was wrong and I couldn't explain, I just held out the peach, and he took a bite, and I watched it happen to him too, the same astonishment, the world coming back through the same door it had left by, and we stood on the porch of the house we had nearly died in and ate a peach and did not say one word, because some things are too large and too simple for words, and that was one of the good days, one of the best, right there at the end, and no warmth gave it to us. We had come back far enough to be given a peach. I did not know how few of those days were left.

22.

We were clean for almost a year.

I need to tell you about that year, briefly, because it was quiet, and quiet years don't get told, and this one should. We did not get our old life back — you don't; the house was mostly gone, the money was gone, the second books were gone, the editor in New York had long since stopped writing. But we got *a* life back, a small careful one, built close to the ground. Daniel taught two days a week at the community college an hour away, and was, his students said, the best teacher they'd ever had, because a man who has been all the way to the bottom and climbed back has a certain thing to say to the young that the undamaged can't fake. I started writing again — slowly, badly at first, the hand gone stiff, and then less badly — not the big book, something smaller and truer, about the town, about Alder, about the funerals and the grandmothers and the flinty grace of it. We went to the rooms, the meetings in the church basement, and sat in the folding chairs and held hands and did not say much, and it helped, the way it helps, by putting you in a room with people who know the thing you can't explain to anyone else. We were, I think, happy, in the new gray-and-color way, the chastened way, the way of people who have spent everything and found, to their

surprise, that there was something underneath the everything, something the fire hadn't reached, and that it was enough.

I want to give you that year the way I gave you the first winter in Alder, because it was the last of the good, and because if you do not see it you will not understand what was taken. The people outside never see it. They see the before and the after and they skip the quiet middle, where two people were, against every odd, briefly, almost well.

Daniel teaching. I drove him the hour to the college those first months, because his license was gone and because I could not yet bear to let him out of my sight, and sometimes I sat in the back of the room pretending to read and watched him with those kids — nineteen, twenty, most of them the first in their families ever to sit in a college room, a lot of them from towns like Alder with the same thing eating the same houses. He did not teach them to write. He taught them that what they had to say was worth the trouble of saying well, which is the only thing anyone can really teach, and he taught it as a man who had lost everything and come back, so that when a boy who had never once been told his life was interesting read out three plain sentences about his father's hands, Daniel went very still, and then said, quietly, *that, keep that, that's the good one* — the same words, the exact words, he had said to me across a seminar table a lifetime before — and I watched the boy's whole face change, and I had to look back down at my book. He was better that year than he had ever been at anything in his life. The damage had made him kind in a way the undamaged cannot counterfeit, and the kids knew it, and they lined up at his office door. One girl, who was in the thing herself, you could see it on her, used to come not for the writing but just to sit in his office for an hour a week and be in a room with an adult who had been where she was and gotten out. He never once rushed her. I have wondered since how many of them he saved in that one year, that he never knew he saved.

And I wrote. The small true book, about the town — at this desk, this one, where I am now. The sentences came slow and stiff at first, the hand gone cold after the years away, and then less stiff, and one afternoon I surfaced and understood that I had been writing for three hours and had not once thought about the thing,

not once watched the clock, and I sat back and understood that the work had come back. Really come back. Clean this time, with no warmth under it and no cruel voice driving it out, just me and the page the way it had been over the dry cleaner thirty years before — and I put my face in my hands at this desk and cried, because I had believed that was gone forever, I had believed that was the price we paid, and here it was, handed back, for free, for nothing, for the single accomplishment of having stayed alive long enough to receive it.

And the meetings, the folding chairs in the basement of the church that had taken itself back off the market. I thought I would hate them; I am not a joiner, I spent my life outside rooms, watching them. But a thing happens in those rooms that happens nowhere else I have been, which is that every person in the circle already knows the one thing about you that you can never explain to anyone who hasn't been where you've been — and so there is nothing to explain, and where the explaining would have been there is just, instead, company. An old miner named Virgil who had buried a son and found the thing in the boy's room afterward and taken it up himself, at sixty, to be nearer to him — which is the saddest and most human reason I have ever heard, and which no one in that circle found strange. A young mother two years clean, white-knuckling it, holding her little coin like the last warm object on earth. Daniel and I did not say much. We held hands and we listened and we put our dollar in the basket and we drove home up the dark river road, and it was, I understand now, church — the realest church I was ever in, in a town where the bank had become one and nobody believed in anything except that they were all going to try not to die this week, together, which may be the only thing I have ever found that is actually worth believing in.

Here is Daniel, from that year — the last of the blue notebook but one. I keep it where I can reach it.

Second month clean and I can report that the world is the color of wet cardboard and food tastes like the idea of food and I would not go back for anything on this earth. That is the thing they never tell you — that you can be grey and half-dead and flat as a parking lot and still, underneath it, lower than the greyness reaches, know with

total certainty that you would rather be here, awake, in the wet cardboard, with Clare in the next room making that small sound she makes when a sentence finally comes, than in any of the places the warmth ever took me. The warmth took me a lot of places. None of them had her in them. Not really. I only thought they did — that was the entire trick of the thing, it wore her face and I fell for it every single time. And now I am grey and clean and I can tell the difference again, and the difference is the one thing I know that is worth knowing: the warmth was her face on a stranger, and this — the wet cardboard, the real room, the real sound of her in it — this is her. I will take the wet cardboard. Every day of my life. I will take it.

That was the clean year, and I needed you to see it — to see that we made it back, that it was real, that we were, in the wet-cardboard way, in the chastened, grateful, holding-hands-in-the-basement way, happy — before I tell you how it ended, so that you will grieve it the way I grieve it: not as a tragedy that was always going to happen, but as a life, a good hard real life, that we had gotten back, that we were living, that was taken.

And through all of it, Daniel's back went on speaking. That is the thing I come back to, lying awake even now. We had been given, by the oak tree, a pain with no end, an honest pain, a real one — and we had found the thing that ends all pain, and it had very nearly ended us, and we had crawled back from it across broken glass, and at the end of all of it, when everything else had been paid and lost and grieved and slowly, partly, mended — the back still hurt. Every single day. The first cause of everything, the honest reason, was still there, speaking, low and constant, the way it had spoken since the night in the rain, and it would speak every day for the rest of his life, and the thing that would quiet it in twenty minutes was a phone call away in a town where it was in half the houses, and he knew that, and I knew that, and we did not talk about it, and we held hands in the folding chairs, and we stayed.

We had one rule, by then. We had learned it in the cold and we never once said it out loud because it was too important to risk wearing out with words. The rule was the whole of what we had learned, the one thing the bottom had taught us, and it was this: *not*

apart. Whatever came, whatever we did or didn't do, whatever either of us reached for or put down, we would do it in the sight of the other one. We would not have secrets. We would not, ever again, be alone in anything. That was the rule, and it was not a rule about drugs, it was a rule about us, and it had carried us alive through every fire there was, and I believed in it the way you believe in the floor under your bed.

I was teaching myself, that whole quiet year, to believe we were going to be all right. I had almost managed it. That is where I have to stop tonight, with us almost all right, clean most of a year, eating peaches, holding hands in the church basement, Daniel teaching the young and me writing about the town, the back speaking its low word every day and the two of us staying anyway, together, under our one unspoken rule.

Because the next thing I have to tell you is the thing the whole book has been walking toward, the thing I have been turning my face away from for five parts, and it happened on an ordinary Thursday, and it happened because, for the first and only time in everything we ever went through, one of us was alone.

THE JOY PLANT

Step out one last time, into the making of our own world, and I will tell you the thing that I think, of everything in this book, you are least likely to already know, and least likely to forget once you do.

For two hundred years, every time we have made this flower stronger, we have sold the stronger thing as the cure for the weaker one. And every time, we have been believed, because the people doing the selling were not criminals in alleys. They were the doctors and the chemists and the great trusted companies of their day.

Start with the pure heart of it. Around the year 1804, a young German pharmacist's apprentice named Sertürner [SER-toor-ner] did what nobody had managed before and pulled the one pure powerful thing out of the poppy's milk — and it was ten times stronger than the milk it came from, and he named it, you remember, for the god of dreams. Morphine [MOR-feen]. A wonder. A gift. And then they invented, in the eighteen-fifties, a way to put it straight into the blood through a hollow needle, which made it faster and stronger still, and they gave it to wounded soldiers by the hundreds of thousands — in the American Civil War so many came home unable to stop that the thing nearly got a name of its own — and morphine, the wonder, began to show its other face.

So they went looking for a cure for the morphine. And in London, in 1874, a chemist boiled morphine with another chemical and made something stronger yet, and set it aside. And a great German company picked it up, and in 1898 they gave it a brand name — they took it from the German word for *heroic*, because of how mighty and well it made you feel — and they sold it, around the entire world, as a medicine, a cough syrup, a safe and *non-addictive* cure for morphine addiction. Heroin. The cure for the cure. It was in the catalogues. It was for children's coughs. It took them years to admit what it was, and they only stopped selling it, and the law only caught up with it, after it had already gotten its hands into the century.

And here is the part that should stop your breath, because it is not history, it is us. In 1996, almost exactly a hundred years after Bayer, a company called Purdue brought out a new pill — stronger, longer-lasting, built from the same flower — and told the doctors of America, in their own printed materials, that "less than one percent" of patients who took it would become addicted. They had almost nothing to stand that number on; it leaned, in part, on a single short letter published in a medical journal in 1980, five words of which got quoted for thirty years, about hospital patients, a study that had nothing to do with their pill. But the doctors believed it, the way doctors had believed it about heroin, the way everyone always believes it, because why would the most trusted institutions of your age lie to you about medicine — and they wrote the prescriptions by the millions, and more than two hundred thousand Americans died of that pill alone, and when at last the pill was made harder to get, the people already caught in it turned, exactly as Daniel and I turned, to the cheaper nearer thing, and then to a thing stronger than any of it, made in warehouses, measured in grains too small to see, and the dying did not slow down. It sped up.

The same lie, every single time, for two hundred years. *This new one is the safe one.* Morphine is the safe opium. Heroin is the safe morphine. The pill is the safe heroin. And every time, the people who believed it were not weak and were not stupid. They were sick, and in pain, and they were told by the kindest and most trusted voices of their age that this time there was no shadow on it.

That is what Dr. Prewitt was told, in his training, by his journals, by the companies' smiling men who brought the lunch. And that is what Dr. Prewitt, who was kind, who was tired, who had a waiting room full of hurting people, told Daniel and me, in his brown office, and in the sunny kitchen, over the windowsill, in good faith, every word of it meant as mercy. Everyone was kind. There was no villain. There is never, quite, a villain. There is only the lie, the oldest and most reasonable lie there is, told again and again down the centuries in the voice of medicine itself — and underneath the lie, unchanged in ten thousand years, patient as the Bat Cave, the flower, which takes away pain and fear and grief exactly as it always has, and which does not lie, and has never once needed to.

VI. HOME AGAIN

23.

The thing that took him, in the end, was a good thing. I have had to learn to hold that, and it is the heaviest of all of them.

That autumn — our second clean autumn, almost a year dry — a small magazine took the first piece of the thing I'd been writing about Alder, the quiet true thing, the funerals and the grandmothers and the flinty grace, and then a little festival two hours south, in the college town, asked if I would come and read it. It was nothing. It was a church hall and forty folding chairs and a check that barely covered the gas. But it was the first time in six years that the world had asked either of us to come and be a writer, out loud, in front of people, and Daniel would not hear of my saying no. His back was bad that week — the cold had come early and the cold always woke the metal and the deep torn place — and the drive would have been two hours each way on hard seats, and he could not have borne it, and we both knew it, and so we did the thing we had not done in all the years of the fire: we decided I would go alone, and come home the next morning. One night. He all but pushed me out the door. He stood on the porch of our half-sold house in his old cardigan and watched me back the bad car down the drive, and he was smiling, and the last thing he said to me, calling it down the drive, was *go be a writer, Clare, somebody in this house should,* and he was laughing when he said it, and I was laughing, and that is the last thing, that is the last whole thing I have of him, my husband laughing on the porch in the cold, proud of me, sending me off to be the thing we had come to the end of the world to be.

I read the piece. People were kind. A young woman came up afterward with my first book, my old one, the one the reviews had called promising, and asked me to sign it, and told me it had meant something to her in college, and I stood in a church hall two hours from home and felt, for one evening, like a person who had a life. I called Daniel that night from the motel. He was tired and his back was bad and he was glad for me, I could hear it, and we talked for a while about nothing, about the young woman and the book, and he told me to sleep well, and I told him to take his medicine for the back — the real medicine, the allowed kind, the small careful kind

— and go to bed, and he said he would, and we said the thing we always said, the ordinary thing, and I hung up, and I slept well, in a motel, two hours away, for the first and only night in everything we ever went through that I was not in the next bed.

I have spent nine years not knowing what happened in our house that night, because the one person who could have told me was alone. That is the particular cruelty of it, the one that is mine to carry: everything else we did, we did in each other's sight, and so I have it, all of it, every fire, witnessed, shared, mine as much as his. But the last hours of his life happened with no one there, and so they are the one part of our whole life together that I do not have, that I will never have, that I can only build out of what I know and then take apart again at three in the morning and build again. I know the back was bad. I know the house was empty in a way it had not been empty in thirty years of marriage. I know that the thing that quiets a screaming back in twenty minutes was, that autumn, in half the houses in Alder, a phone call away, and that he knew exactly where, and that he had known, every single day for a year, and had stayed, because I was there, because of the rule, because we were not apart. And I know that on the one night we were apart, with the pain up and the house silent and no one's eyes to meet across the gap, he reached back. Just once. I believe it was just once. I believe, I have to believe, I have built my ability to go on living on believing, that it was not a decision, not a door he chose, just a man alone with an old honest pain reaching for the only thing that had ever fully answered it, the way you'd reach in the dark for a hand that had always been there.

That is the version I told myself for nine years, and I told it so well and so long that I could nearly hear it in his voice — which, you will understand before this book is finished, is a thing I have learned to do. I am not going to leave it standing. I have laid that night out in a row, the way I once laid the cracks of the first autumn in a row, and the pieces do not say what I made them say. They say something worse. But let me do it in order, the way I have done all of it. Let me give you his last page first, the way I have given you everything of his, and then I will tell you the truth about the last page, because the truth about the last page is the truth about the whole of it, and you have earned it by now, and so, God help me, have I.

And his body had forgotten. That is the mechanical heart of it, the part with no mercy and no meaning in it at all. A year clean, his body had done the faithful thing, had turned its own locks back on, had rebuilt its tolerance down to nothing, down to a baby's — which is the whole point, which is the body healing, which is the reward for all that cold. So the amount that a year before had been a Tuesday, had been nothing, had been just enough to get back to ordinary — that amount, in a body that had healed, in a body that had forgotten how to survive it, was a flood where now there were only drops. And the warmth did the last thing it does, the kindest and the worst, the thing it had tried once before on the bathroom floor when I was there to breathe for him. It reached down into my husband, alone in our house, and switched off the oldest instruction, gently, with no drama, and this time there was no one in the next room to hear the sound stop, and no one to find the little box the county gave out, and no one to put her mouth on his mouth and breathe. He had made it all the way through the cold. He had made it all the way across to the dry ground. And then, on the one night he was alone, the healing killed him.

And here is the piece of that I could not pick up for nine years either, because it will not be put down once you have it: he knew. He had sat in the same church basements I had and heard the same flat warning they save for the end of the meeting, the one about the clean body and the old number, about how the thing that healed you is the thing that makes the old amount a killing amount. He knew better than almost anyone alive what a year of staying clean does to the arithmetic. A man who reaches, after a year, for the number that used to be a Tuesday is not a man who forgot. He is a man who remembered.

24.

Here is Daniel. The last page of the blue notebook. Written that night, I think — the ink is the pen we kept by the chair in the parlor — and it is not about any of what I have just told you, because he did not know, when he wrote it, that there was anything to tell. It is just an ordinary page, the last ordinary page, and that is why I can hardly bear to copy it out, and why it is the truest thing in this whole book, and why I am going to end his part of it here, on his own words, where it belongs.

Clare gone to read. The house too quiet. I keep waiting to hear her in the next room and she is not in the next room, and I find I don't know what to do with a quiet I can't turn and talk into. Thirty years and I have never learned to be in a room she isn't in. I hope they were kind to her tonight. They'd better have been. She stood up in a seminar room half my life ago with a sentence she was ashamed of, and it was the best thing in the room, and I knew it before she did, and tonight a church full of strangers two hours away is finding out the thing I have known since I was twenty-nine, which is that I married the real one. I was always the one they called promising. She was the one who was good. I figured that out years ago and decided to love her instead of mind it, which is the single smartest thing I have ever done.

The back is loud tonight. I'll take the allowed thing and put myself to bed and she'll be home by noon and I'll make her tell me every word of it twice. We have almost nothing left, the house is half gone, we are two broke wrecked old writers in a dying town, and I lay here tonight and did the thing you're not supposed to be able to do anymore, I counted up what we have, and I'll tell you, notebook, since you're the only one awake: it comes out higher than it has any right to. We went all the way down and we did it holding hands. Not one thing in thirty years did I have to go through by myself. Do you know how few people get to say that. I'd do the whole thing again. The oak tree and the warmth and the cold and all of it, every second, if the alternative was doing it alone, or worse, having her do any of it alone. I'd sign for the whole ruin again tomorrow, happily, for the single fact of having been in it with her the whole way.

She'll be home by noon. I can almost stand the quiet if I know she'll be home by noon.
Goodnight, Clare. Come home.

25.

I came home by noon. I want to say that, because he wanted me home by noon, and I was. I came up the drive a little after twelve with the reading still warm in me and a signed copy of my own old book on the seat, ready to tell him every word of it twice, and the house had the wrong feeling before I was out of the car, the quiet I had taught myself to be afraid of, and I will not tell you about the finding, I have told you everything else but I will not tell you that, it is the one thing I am keeping, an old woman is allowed to keep one thing. I will only tell you that he was in his chair in the parlor, in the colored light, which had moved across the floor all morning the way it does, across him, and that the blue notebook lay open on the floor beside the chair where it had gone from his hand, and that it was many hours too late, and that there was no breath to bring back, and that the little box the county gives out was in the kitchen drawer where it had always been, unopened, three rooms away, useless, because the whole terrible science of it is that the box only works if someone is there, and for the first time in thirty years, no one was there.

Ruth came. The town came. There were so many funerals in Alder by then that they knew exactly how to do it, which is its own unbearable thing, a town so practiced at burying its own that it moves through the motions with a terrible gentle competence, the casseroles already made, the second viewing room already open. The people held my hands in both of theirs, the way they do, and looked at me the way you look at the lesson at the end of a story, and I let them, because they were kind, and because there was no way to tell them, standing in the funeral home, that they had the story wrong, that it was not the story they thought, that I would not be standing there in the one thing I had that was black if I had been willing, thirty years ago, to be a person who went through her life alone and safe.

And Ruth — Ruth who had been right about everything, Ruth who had begged and researched and found the ugly blessed building and

driven us there herself — Ruth held me longest, at the end, when the others had gone, and she said the thing she had been not-saying for years, she said, *if you had just,* and she couldn't finish it, and she didn't have to, because I had a thousand ways to finish it myself. If you had just listened sooner. If you had just let me take him when he'd have let himself be taken. If you had just not gone to that reading. If you had just been in the next room, one more night, the way you were every other night for thirty years, you could have breathed for him, you had done it before, you knew how, the whole town knew how, you could have brought him back.

She didn't say that last one. And for nine years I let it be the shape of the whole thing — my fault, my one night away, my broken rule. I wore it the way I wore the black dress. It was easier to be the woman who left than to be the woman who knows what I am about to tell you, because guilt at least keeps the dead innocent, and I wanted him innocent more than I wanted the truth.

But I have laid that night in a row, and the pieces do not say what I let them say. Here are the pieces. For nine years he had turned down every reason to leave that house without me — every reading, every doctor two counties off, every trip Ruth ever tried to put him on — and then, that one autumn, he insisted, he all but carried me to the car, for a church hall and forty folding chairs he could not otherwise have cared less about. His back was bad that week; his back was bad every week; it had been bad for nine years and had never once sent me away before. He knew exactly where the thing was, and had known every single day for a year, and in all that year, with it a phone call away, he never once reached for it — not while I was in the house. And on the one night I was not, he did. The rule we had kept like a religion for thirty years, the *not-apart* that had carried us through every fire, he did not break by accident on the single worst possible night of all the nights there were. He chose the night. He made the night. He sent me two hours down the road to feel like a writer so that I would be two hours down the road when it happened.

He did it so that it would not be me. That is the piece I could not pick up, and it is the whole of it. Not so no one could stop him, though no one could. So that it would not be me who found him

breathing wrong and had to decide, one more time, whether to drag him back into a life he could no longer carry; so that I would be in a bright hall being a person instead of on a bathroom floor with my mouth on his; so that the last thing he did to me was not one more thing I had to survive him doing. He had come to believe, somewhere in that long quiet autumn, that there was nothing left he could give me but his absence — that as long as he was in the room for me to hold on to, I would hold on, and we would go on holding each other down in the warm dark we had made, the two of us the reason neither of us could ever climb all the way out. And he decided to be the one who let go of the hand. He thought it was the last kindness he had in him.

And I will not call it that. I have had nine years and I will not. He thought it was love and it was not love; it was the warmth, at the very end, telling him in his own gentle reasonable voice that the loving thing was to go — and that was the last lie it ever told him, and the cruelest, because the loving thing was to stay. To be broken and boring and alive in the next room. To let me have him ruined for forty more years rather than not have him at all, and to let me be the one who decided what I could carry. He took that from me. He decided, alone, in the dark, that my life would be better with him gone out of it, and then he arranged it so that I could never once argue the point, and there is a word for a man who loves you and leaves you certain it was for your own good, and the word is not kindness. He had no right. I do not forgive him for it. I understand it all the way to the bottom, which is worse than not understanding it, and I still do not forgive him, and I have stopped trying to, because the not-forgiving is the last argument he and I are ever going to have, and I am not ready to let him win it by being dead.

26.

There is one more thing, and it is the hardest, and I have kept it for the end because once you have read it you cannot read the rest of this book the way you read it the first time.

I told you, at the very start, that I was writing this out of both of us — me now, at the desk, and Daniel then, in the blue notebook, in his own words, which were always better than mine. That was true of every page but one.

When I came up the drive that noon, the blue notebook lay open on the floor by the chair, face up, where it had gone from his hand. I have told you I will not describe the finding, and I am keeping that. But I will tell you the one thing I have never told a living soul, which is that the page it lay open to was blank. The last page. He had taken down the pen we kept by the chair, the way he had ten thousand nights of his life, the man who did not believe a thing had happened to him until he had written it — and he had written nothing. Not a line. Not a word. Not the worst sentence of the day. On the one night of his whole life that he was alone, he left the page white, and a blank page from Daniel was not nothing. It was the loudest page in the house. It was the thing I have just spent a chapter telling you, set down in the one language he knew I would have to read: the silence of a man who has decided a thing he cannot write where his wife will find it.

And I could not bear it. I have to ask you to hold two things that will not sit together — that I was not in my right mind that week, which no one is, and that I knew exactly what I was doing. I could not bear that his last night was wordless, and I could not bear what the blank page was saying, and so I did the thing I did. That week, at this desk, with his pen, in the downhill hand I had been forging for thirty years as a joke and could have done in my sleep, I wrote the last page of the blue notebook. The one you read. The seminar room and the real one and the smartest thing he ever did. The counting-up of a ruined life. *I'd sign for the whole ruin again. Goodnight, Clare. Come home.* Every word of it is mine. He never wrote a line of it. I gave my dead husband the last page he did not leave, because I would not live in a house where his last night was blank, and because I would not — I will not, even now, even here — let the thing that killed him have the final word in his own voice.

And here is what I did with it, and it is the truest thing I know about myself and the worst. I took the warm page and I laid it down over the cold one. What I believe is that he counted up our whole life that night and found that it was the thing killing us both — the madness we had kept warm between us all those years, the holding-on that was also a holding-down — and that he stepped out of the room to end it. What I wrote is a man who counted up the same life and found it worth every second and lay down meaning to

wake. I wrote him choosing us. I buried the thing I think actually took him — the thing this book is named for — under a loving page in his own hand, on purpose, with my eyes open, because I would rather forge my husband's love than report his despair, and I would do it again tonight.

I do not know which of them is the real one — the Daniel I think let go of my hand to save me, or the Daniel I wrote who would never have let go at all. I have decided to believe the one I wrote. I am telling you plainly that it is a decision and not a fact, so that you do not close this book and take my mercy for the truth; but I have made it, and I will make it again every morning I have left. I became, at the very end, the thing the young pharmacist named the drug for two hundred years ago, the thing Daniel told me about across a kitchen table in the gold light, lit up and delighted and not knowing he was naming the end of us: the one who comes to you in the night wearing the face of someone you love, and gives you, in their own voice, the one thing you cannot go on living without having heard. I came to Daniel. I put on his face. I wrote him home.

So now you know why I cannot say it the way Ruth needs me to say it, and why I also cannot say it the way the world needs me to say it, and why it took a whole book.

If you asked me — would you undo it — I would say yes, instantly, without one second's thought. I would undo the oak tree. I would make the doe step out one minute later. I would take the pain and the amber bottle and the needle and the cold and the gray and the peach and the church basement and the chair in the colored light, all of it, every second, and I would give it all back in a heartbeat to have Daniel old and whole and boring beside me, two writers who never had an accident, who wrote their forgettable second books and grew dull and gray together and died in some ordinary far-off way with the lights on and someone in the next room. I would trade our whole blazing ruin for that gray safe nothing in less time than it takes to say so, and anyone who tells you different about their own lost love is performing. I am not performing. Given the choice, I would undo all of it. The drug was never worth anything. It took everything, and it gave nothing back that it did not first steal, and it killed the best man I ever knew, alone, three rooms from the thing

that could have saved him. Let no one close this book thinking I said the warmth was worth it. The warmth was a counterfeit and a thief and I would burn every poppy on earth to have him back.

But I was not given the choice. That is the thing. Nobody is. The oak tree happened, and the pain was real, and the mercy was real, and the door closed the way it closes on everyone, with no click, and once we were inside the thing we could not undo — once it was simply the terrain of our life, the mountain we happened to live on, the weather we happened to get — then the only question left, the only question any of us ever really gets, was *how.* Not whether. How. And the how was the one thing that was ours, the one thing the drug could not take, the one thing I would not trade and will not let Ruth or the world or you take from me now: we went through it together. All of it. Every inch of the thing we could not undo, we went through in each other's sight, holding hands, hiding nothing, alone in nothing — the joy and the work and the warmth and the line in the bathroom and the cold and the gray and the peach, none of it ranked, none of it suffered by one of us out of the sight of the other, one whole human catastrophe lived all the way down and all the way back by two people who refused, to the very last night, to be alone in it. And that — not the drug, never the drug — is the thing I wrote that Daniel counted up on his last night. Whether he truly counted it that way, or whether I counted it for him and forged his name under it because I could not stand the sum he actually reached, it is the one figure I am certain of, and I will sign it in my own hand, awake and sober and in the daylight where it can be checked: it was never the warmth that was worth anything. If a single thing in our life was worth what it cost us, it was the hand across the gap, and nothing else, and I would sign for that on any page you put in front of me. So I am signing. The ruin I would undo in a heartbeat. The togetherness inside the ruin I would not trade for a safe and separate century. Both of those are true, and holding them both at once, without dropping either, is the whole of what I have, and it has taken me nine years and this entire book to learn to carry it, and I think, tonight, finally, I can.

There are two stacks of notebooks on the desk in front of me, and one of them is still his.

I have been writing out of both of us, because it was the only honest way, and because the second book, the one that would not come, the one we drove to the end of the world to write and then could not write because the thing that unblocked us was the same thing that was unmaking us — it turns out it was this one, all along. It was always going to be this one. It just had to wait until one of us was left to write it, clean, at the old desk, in the colored light, with his voice still in the blue notebook saying *come home.*

I'm home, Daniel. I came home by noon. I've been home nine years. And I have finally written the thing you always said I was the one who could write, and it is about you, and it is about us, and it is the truest thing I have ever done, and I did it alone, which is the one way I never wanted to do anything, and which is, I have come to think, the last gift the two of us had left to give each other: that one of us lived to tell it, so that it would not, in the end, go untold, the way your last night went — unwitnessed, alone, in a quiet house, with the light moving across the floor.

Not this. This last one, at least, we made the way we made everything — you on your pages for as long as you had pages to write, and me on mine, and then, at the end, me on yours, in your hand, giving you the words you did not leave. It is the only way there is left to do a thing together with the dead. It is a kind of not-apart. It is the last kind I get.

Goodnight, Clare. Come home, I wrote, in your hand, on the blank page, because you did not.

So I will answer the page I wrote. I came home, Daniel. I came home by noon, the way you told me to — the way I told you to tell me. I've been home nine years. And I have written us all the way to the end now, the true and the forged laid down in the same ink, where no one can ever pull the one back out of the other, and I am going to close the blue notebook, and close mine, and let you sleep the way I have decided you slept: counting us up, and finding us worth it, and meaning to wake.

Goodnight, Daniel. I'm home.

WHAT IT DID

Set down plainly, the way a field-worker records what was in front of them, this is what the substance did in this book.

What it was. Heroin, and before it the medicine it is descended from, and before that the poppy they are both drawn from. A relief drug: it works on the body's own system for switching off pain, fear and want, and it opens that system all the way.

Time. It did not so much speed time or slow it as empty it of weight. Whole afternoons passed without being spent. The day stopped being morning and evening and became the short stretch after and the long stretch before.

The body. First the end of pain — not pain reduced but pain deposed, still there and governing nothing. Then the body, finding the flood arrive every day, turned its own supply down to meet it, so that in time the drug no longer lifted anyone to heaven; it only returned them to ordinary, and ordinary could be reached no other way.

The self. The whole anxious committee that runs a person — the one that keeps the accounts, remembers the failures, stands behind the shoulder and says you are a fraud — fell silent. What was left, the first time, felt like peace, and like being held by something that wanted nothing. It was the most dangerous gift either of them was ever given, because it came wearing the face of everything they loved.

The world. For one season the work came as it never had, and they believed the warmth had opened the door the fear kept shut. The pages they kept prove the work was real. They also show that the door it came through was the same door that was closing on everything else.

What it meant. That the deepest closeness two people can reach and the thing that destroys them can arrive together — through one door, in one warmth, wearing one beloved face — and that no one, however clear-eyed, can take the one without the other. That is not

a weakness in the people it happened to. It is the design of the thing.

The cost. It took the work, the money, the house, and the years. It took the body's own ability to make its small daily peace, and gave nothing lasting back for it. And on the night the body had healed enough to be killed by the old amount, it took the better of the two, alone, three rooms from the thing that could have saved him. It lets fewer people back out than any door in this series. It is still, as these words are set down, killing more each year than the year before.

THE MAPMAKER

For Candace Pert, and for Friedrich Sertürner.

Two people drew the map of this one, at the opposite ends of its long story — one at the beginning, who pulled the drug out of the flower, and one near the end, who found the lock in us that the drug had been looking for all along.

In a pharmacy in a small German town, around the year 1804, a pharmacist's apprentice barely out of his teens named Friedrich Sertürner [SER-toor-ner] did a thing no one had managed in all the thousands of years people had used the poppy: he drew the single pure, powerful thing out of its milk — the white crystal at the heart of it that does the work. It was the first time anyone had pulled the active substance out of any plant at all, the small beginning of the science that now gives us nearly every medicine we have. He tested it on himself and on three boys, none of them older than seventeen, and very nearly killed them all finding out how strong it was. And he gave it a name. He was young, and it was an age of poets, so he reached for the oldest story he knew and named his white crystal after Morpheus [MOR-fee-us], the Greek god of dreams — the one who slips into a sleeper's room at night wearing the face of someone the sleeper loves. He called it morphium, a name the world would soon smooth to morphine. He could not have named it better if he had known everything that was coming.

A hundred and seventy years later, and an ocean away, a graduate student named Candace Pert [kan-DASS PURT] answered the question Sertürner's crystal had left hanging in the air: why should the human brain have any use at all for a chemical squeezed out of a flower? In 1973, in a laboratory at Johns Hopkins, working under Solomon Snyder, she proved that the brain carries a lock the drug fits — a receptor [ree-SEP-ter], a keyhole shaped, it would turn out, for the body's own painkillers, the faint daily relief we make in small amounts for ourselves and call endorphins [en-DOR-fins]. The poppy had spent ten thousand years quietly picking a lock every one of us is born carrying. She was twenty-six years old. A few

years on, when the field's great prize was given for the work and her name was left off it, she said so, out loud, which was not the done thing and cost her something, and which this page records because the truth of who did the work is the whole reason the page exists. She spent the rest of her life on the chemistry of feeling, and died in 2013.

Neither of them is honoured here for what the drug became. They are honoured for seeing clearly — one into a flower, one into us — and for the plain fact that we know what this thing is because they stopped and looked.

Sources. Sertürner isolated morphine from opium in 1804 — the first alkaloid ever drawn from a plant — and named it morphium, later smoothed to morphine, for Morpheus; his full account and near-fatal self-experiment with three boys were published in 1817 (he lived 1783–1841). Pert's demonstration of the opiate receptor: C. B. Pert and S. H. Snyder, "Opiate Receptor: Demonstration in Nervous Tissue," Science 179 (March 1973). The brain's own opioids, the enkephalins: Hughes, Kosterlitz and colleagues, 1975. The 1978 Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award, given for this work to Snyder, Hughes and Kosterlitz, passed over Pert, who protested her exclusion. C. Pert, Molecules of Emotion (1997).

GLOSSARY

endorphin [en-DOR-fin] — a shortening of *endogenous morphine*. The body's own faint, daily painkillers, made in small amounts; the poppy's drugs are flooded copies of them.

hul gil [hool GEEL] — Sumerian, *joy plant*. The poppy's name on the oldest written tablets we have.

laudanum [LAW-duh-num] — apothecary Latin. Opium dissolved in alcohol; sold openly and cheaply for almost any ailment through the eighteen-hundreds.

Morpheus [MOR-fee-us] — The Greek god of dreams, who slips into a sleeper's room at night wearing the face of someone the sleeper loves.

morphine [MOR-feen] — named for Morpheus. The first pure drug drawn out of the poppy, isolated about 1804; many times the strength of the milk it came from.

nepenthe [neh-PEN-thee] — Greek, *no-grief*. In Homer, a drug slipped into wine that takes away grief and the memory of pain.

opion [OP-ee-on] — Greek, *the juice*. The white milk wept by the scored poppy; the root of the word *opium*.

Pert, Candace [kan-DASS PURT] — The American scientist who, in 1973, proved the brain carries the lock the poppy's drugs fit.

receptor [ree-SEP-ter] — The lock, or keyhole, on a brain cell that one particular chemical fits; the poppy's drugs fit the one the body keeps for its own painkillers.

Sertürner, Friedrich [SER-toor-ner] — The German apothecary's apprentice who first drew morphine out of the poppy and named it for the god of dreams.



Two writers, married most of a lifetime, leave a city that has priced them out and buy a cheap, beautiful house in Alder — a dying coal town in the West Virginia mountains — to write the second books that will not come. For a while, in the gold light and the quiet, it works.

Then a deer steps onto a wet road at night, and the car does not make the turn. What they are sent home with, for a pain that will never fully leave, comes in a small amber bottle: a warmth that quiets not only the body but everything a person spends a life afraid of.

They go down into it the way they have done everything — together, holding hands, hiding nothing, each in the sight of the other. For one golden season the work has never been better. The town is dying of the same thing in half its houses. And the warmth that opens every door begins, without a sound, to close them.

What is left is one of them, at the desk, years on, setting down the whole of it: the love, the ruin, the one rule that kept them both alive, and the single night it did not. Not to be forgiven. Not to be pitied. To be understood.

It came into the house looking exactly like mercy.

H E R E B E D E L O S
R O Y A P U B L I C A T I O N S