

**ROYA**  
PUBLICATION  
No. 17

# NATURAL NOISE

*Some systems are not built to be escaped*



## Chew Z

— A ROYA PUBLICATION —

# **NATURAL NOISE**

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 17

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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Asha — forty-fourth day  
circles. not hexagons.

— pressed, not drawn

the wall goes flat on its own

5.3 mm

nobody measured this

## SYNOPSIS

Teo keeps bees on the rise above Halden, a small town he was sent to a year ago for what the Halden Apiary Trust calls a period of restorative work — and he cannot, no matter how honestly he tries, remember why. What starts as a private curiosity, a borrowed dish of slime mold reaching toward a feeding hour it has no business remembering, widens over a slow season into ants whose trails move overnight, a swarm he chases through town with his own heart in his throat, and a hive whose every hexagon turns out to have been built by nobody at all. Between his careful, unhurried courtship of a florist named Adela and the twice-monthly visits of a doctor named Farrow who never once says no to a question and never once fully answers one, Teo assembles, log entry by log entry, a case for the possibility that his entire life has been arranged for him — and a counter-case, drawn from the same bees, that some things cannot be arranged in advance no matter how much time or care a person had to try. When the storm finally comes, it brings with it the one fact Teo can't work around: that a system built entirely on honest rules can be every bit as impossible to see through as a lie. *Natural Noise* is a slow, meditative noir about conditioning, memory, and the honeybee's quiet, leaderless democracy — and about what it costs to want the truth of your own life more than you want to keep it.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every complex system alive today — a beehive, an ant colony, a rainstorm, a slime mold blindly threading a maze — runs on the same unglamorous ingredients: a small set of local rules, followed by a great many actors who have no view of the whole. What varies enormously, and what this book is actually about, is what those rules are built to permit. Some systems keep just enough error in their signal that the error becomes the mechanism by which they find things they didn't know to look for. Others eliminate the error in the name of efficiency, or comfort, or safety — and in doing so, eliminate their own capacity to discover anything they weren't already built to expect.

I wanted to write about a man living inside a system tuned all the way toward the second kind — kept, protected, spared incident — who spends a year of quiet mornings with bees before the shape of that arrangement becomes visible to him. Not because someone tells him. Because he starts paying enough attention to the rest of the natural world that the pattern gives itself away.

Behind that sits a question that's occupied writers I return to often — PKD's *Time Out of Joint*, the sealed-set unease of *The Truman Show*, Lem's *The Futurological Congress* with its sharper, harder version of the same problem: if a controlled life were made comfortable enough, would you actually want to know? And if you found out anyway, would the discovery buy you anything real, or just a different, harsher kind of managed condition?

I don't think *Natural Noise* answers that. I'm not sure it's answerable from inside a life, which is more or less the position I wanted the reader in by the end, alongside Teo. What I can say is that the honeybee — which has no leader, decides where to live by something close to an actual vote, and communicates through a dance precise enough to be useful and imprecise enough to keep discovering new things — was the most honest model of a well-run chaotic system I could find. I only had to write down what she already does.

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## ONE

### TOWN

The bees were already up before I was, which was as it should be. I had learned, in the year since I'd come to Halden, not to take this personally — a hive doesn't wait for its keeper any more than a tide waits for a man standing on the shore with a bucket, wondering whether today is the day it finally asks his permission — but some mornings I still stood at the kitchen window with my coffee going cold in my hand, watching the first foragers lift off the landing boards in ones and twos, and felt something in my chest that I never had a better word for than envy.

They knew what they were for. I have never been able to say the same about myself with a straight face, not even now, not even having spent a year learning to say a great many other things about bees with something close to authority.

Halden is the kind of town that looks, from any reasonable distance, like it was built by people who loved it. The bakery on Larch Street opens at six and the smell of it reaches my porch by quarter past, exactly, every morning, winter included, which I used to find charming and have since stopped finding anything at all, the way you stop finding your own heartbeat remarkable. There is a bandstand in the square that nobody has played music from since I arrived, though it is repainted every spring, a pale green that always looks freshly wet. The streets run downhill toward the millpond in long, unhurried curves that never once make you feel you're descending, and the whole town has a particular quality of light in the mornings — soft, a little gold, filtered through elms old enough that no one alive remembers planting them — that I used to think was simply what a well-loved place looks like, before I started wondering whether a place could be arranged to look loved on purpose, the way a table gets set before company arrives.

There is a woman named Adela who sells cut flowers three days a week from a stall near the fountain, and who I have been, for the better part of a year, carefully and deliberately falling in love with, in the unhurried way you fall in love with a person you have decided you are allowed to keep. She has a habit of tucking a stem

of whatever's blooming behind her ear without seeming to notice she's done it, and a laugh that starts low and catches you off guard by how quickly it climbs, and hands that are never quite clean of soil no matter the season, which I have always found, for reasons I couldn't defend under questioning, to be the most honest thing about her.

A year is a strange unit to measure a life in, when you've only been given the one of them to look back on. I have tried, some evenings, to lay it out end to end in my head — the first frost, the first swarm season, the slow lengthening of light through spring and its slow retreat again toward the dark — and found that it holds together the way a well-told story holds together, each season arriving more or less when it should, each one leaving its mark on the next in a way that felt, for most of the year, like nothing more than the ordinary business of time passing. It is only recently that I've started to wonder whether a year can be too well told. Whether a life, watched closely enough, ought to have more loose threads in it than mine has ever shown me.

I tell you all this the way I'd tell it to Farrow, if he asked, which he does, twice a month, in the gentle unbothered voice of a man checking on a house he already knows isn't on fire. And how are you finding the town, Teo. And how is Adela. And the bees — are they settling. I have come to understand that these questions are not really questions. They are more like the hum a transformer makes at a certain distance — a sound you stop hearing until, for no reason you can name, one day you don't.

I keep four hives on the rise behind the Trust's research cottage, on land that technically belongs to the Halden Apiary Trust and which I have been given, in exchange for what they describe as "a period of restorative work," to tend more or less as I please. I did not ask many questions about the arrangement when it was offered to me. I was not, at the time, in a state to ask good questions about anything. There had been — I want to be careful here, because this is a place in the telling where I have noticed myself reaching for a detail and finding my hand closing on something that isn't quite there — there had been an incident. A bad year. I have three or

four different memories of what the year actually contained, and they don't agree with each other in the particulars, only in the general shape, the way three witnesses to the same accident will agree on the weather and disagree on which car ran the light.

What I know for certain is smaller and more useful. I know how to read a frame of brood for signs of trouble before the trouble announces itself — the telltale sunken cap of a cell that should be domed, the faint sour note under the usual warm smell of wax that tells you disease has gotten in before you've found a single symptom to point to. I know the particular low, urgent pitch a hive makes in the hour before it swarms, distinct from every other sound bees make, and I know that once you have heard it you will recognize it for the rest of your life, the way you recognize your own name spoken in a crowded room. I know that honey, properly capped, does not spoil — that a jar sealed and forgotten in a cellar for a hundred years is, chemically, exactly as edible as one sealed last week, which strikes me, some mornings, as the single least sentimental fact I have ever learned, and other mornings as the only real proof I have that anything in this town is what it claims to be.

I suited up a little after six and walked the rise while the grass was still wet enough to darken my boots, the smoker cold and swinging at my side, not yet needed. There is a rhythm to opening a hive properly that took me most of a season to trust in my own hands — a few slow puffs at the entrance first, low and patient, never a blast, then the same again under the lid once it's cracked, giving the bees time to read the smoke as weather rather than alarm and drop down into the comb to feed rather than rise up to fight. Do it right and a hive barely registers you're there at all. Do it wrong, even once, and they remember you for a season.

Asha — I number the hives, officially, for the Trust's records, but I have never been able to stop myself from also naming them, quietly, in the ledger only I read — was the calmest of the four that morning, her entrance traffic steady and unhurried, no fanning at the board, no piping in the grass. I lifted two frames, checked the brood pattern — tight, unbroken, the kind of solid crescent of

capped cells a keeper hopes for and rarely gets two inspections running — and set them back exactly as I'd found them, the way you'd close a book at the page you borrowed it open to. I want to say I noticed something wrong with her that first morning and simply didn't have the vocabulary yet to name it. That would be a better story than the true one, which is that nothing was wrong, nothing at all, and that this — the simple, undramatic fact of a hive having an ordinary Tuesday — is the part of that spring I have gone back to most often since, turning it over, looking for the seam.

I didn't find one. Not that morning. I finished the inspection, made my notes, and walked back down the rise as the bakery smell reached the porch, exactly on schedule, and thought, the way I had thought most mornings for a year without once following the thought anywhere: how strange, that a life could be built this gently, and still feel, some days, like something I am waiting to wake up from.

I did not know yet that I had picked the right metaphor for entirely the wrong reason. That would come later, in smaller pieces than I would have liked, starting — though I couldn't have told you this at the time — with a dish of something gray and formless on my kitchen counter, which I had brought home from the Trust's lab on a whim eleven days earlier, and had not yet learned to watch closely enough.

## TWO

### *APIARY LOG — Asha, eleventh day of the second brood cycle*

I am going to try, in these pages, to keep a proper record — not the notes I file with the Trust, which want numbers, but something closer to what I actually see, since I've noticed that the two are not always the same thing and I would like, for once in my life, to keep an account that doesn't quietly correct itself on the way to the page.

Today's entry isn't about Asha at all. It's about the dish.

I should explain the dish. Farrow's cottage keeps a small teaching culture of slime mold in the back room, more curiosity than

experiment, the kind of thing left on a shelf for visiting schoolchildren to prod at with a stylus. I asked for a portion of it eleven days ago, on impulse, the way you ask for a cutting from someone's garden — no real plan for it, just a wish to have something small and alive on my counter that wasn't a bee, since bees, however much I love them, do not tolerate being watched idly. A slime mold does not seem to mind.

It sits in a shallow dish by the window, a spreading, faintly damp-looking mass the color of an old bruise turning yellow, threaded through with veins a little darker than the rest of it, veins that pulse — visibly, if you watch closely enough and have nowhere better to be — in a slow rhythm of push and pull, like something breathing without lungs. I have taken to sitting with it some evenings the way another man might sit with a fire, no purpose to it beyond the sitting.

It is not, properly speaking, an animal, a plant, or a fungus. It is a single cell, vast by the standards of cells, with no brain and no nerves of any kind, and it can still, by any fair account, be said to decide things. Put it in a dish with a maze scratched into the agar and a crumb of food at either end, and it will spend the first hours flowing into every dead corridor at once — not searching so much as filling, the way water fills a container before it finds the drain — and then, having touched every wrong turn there is to touch, it withdraws from all of them at the same time, slowly, almost gently, until what's left is the shortest path between the two crumbs and nothing else. Nobody taught it the maze. Nobody taught it geometry. It simply stopped being wrong everywhere at once, and what remained was correct by default.

I have read, since bringing it home, that a slime mold fed at a fixed hour for several days in a row will start reaching toward the feeding spot a little before the hour arrives — not consistently, not reliably, but often enough that it isn't noise. Nobody has fully explained how a creature with no memory, in the sense we mean the word, manages to keep something that behaves so much like an appointment. My own has been on my counter for eleven days, fed

at no especially fixed hour, mostly because I am not a disciplined enough man to feed anything on a schedule, myself included.

Which is why it unsettled me a little, this morning, to notice it reaching — a slow gray finger of itself, extended toward the empty corner of the dish, a full twenty minutes before I'd planned to feed it, at what I realized, doing the arithmetic on the back of my hand, was almost exactly the hour I'd fed it the two mornings before.

Two mornings is nothing. Two mornings is coincidence wearing a coincidence's clothes. I want to be careful, in this log, not to be the kind of man who finds a pattern in two data points and then spends the rest of the book pretending he found it in twenty. But I sat at the counter longer than I meant to, watching that small gray reach, and thought about Farrow's questions — and how are you finding the town, and how is Adela — arriving twice a month with the same gentle, unhurried timing, and could not, for a while, get up and start my day.

It occurred to me, not for the first time and not, I suspect, for the last, that the difference between a habit and a leash is mostly a matter of who is holding the other end, and that a creature with no brain at all had just demonstrated, more honestly than I've managed in a year, what it looks like to reach toward something on schedule without knowing why. I sat with that thought longer than the hour deserved, the kitchen gone properly dark around me, the dish the only thing in the room still faintly luminous under the last of the evening light through the window, and found I had no better answer for myself than the one the mold had already given me without meaning to: that reaching is reaching, whatever's on the other end of it, and the reasons come later, if they come at all.

I fed it. It stopped reaching. I went out to the hives, where at least the reasons things happen are reasons I can still, most days, name.

I have thought, since, about why I started keeping this log at all, rather than simply noticing what I noticed and letting it pass, the way I'd let most things pass for most of a year. I think it's because a written thing can be checked against itself later, in a way a memory can't. I don't trust my memory the way I used to. I have decided, for now, to trust the page instead, on the theory that ink

doesn't quietly correct itself the way a mind under strain has been known to.

### **THREE**

#### *TOWN*

Adela's stall smells like a florist's should and nothing like the fields it draws from — cut stems and cold water and a green, bruised sweetness that has more to do with the shears than with anything still rooted — and I have never once walked past it without stopping, which I understand is the entire design of a flower stall and have decided not to hold against her.

The fountain behind her had been running dry for repairs most of that week, and without its noise the square felt strangely bare, the way a room sounds different once you notice a clock has stopped. She was rearranging a bucket of late tulips when I came up, sorting the bruised ones out by feel without once looking down at her hands, which she does the way some people hum without noticing.

"You look like a man who slept badly," she said, without looking up from the buckets, which is a thing she does — reads me before I've said a word, the way she reads which stems have gone soft under the outer leaves, running a thumb down them almost absently while she talks about something else entirely.

"I slept fine," I said, which was not quite a lie and not quite the truth, in the way most of what I told her that year fell somewhere in that particular unlit hallway.

"You always say that." She pulled a browning tulip from the bucket and set it aside without looking at it, the gesture so practiced it seemed to happen independent of her. "One of these mornings you're going to tell me the truth by accident, and I want you to know I'll be paying close enough attention to notice when you do."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a hope," she said, and smiled in the particular way she has that makes it hard to tell whether she's teasing you or handing you something real wrapped up to look like a tease, which I have never

once, in a year, managed to sort out in the moment it was happening.

"You said a name," she said. "Last night. I didn't wake you for it."

I want to be honest about how that landed, since I am trying, in this account, to resist the urge to make myself sound wiser after the fact than I was at the time. It landed the way a door landing shut somewhere in a house you thought was empty lands — not alarming, exactly, but enough to make you stand very still and listen for a second sound that doesn't come.

"What name," I said.

"I couldn't make it out properly. Something with an r in it. You weren't distressed. You said it the way a person reads a name off a list." She set down the stems she was holding and looked at me directly then, which she does less often than you'd think, given how much of her attention seems to be on you at all times. "Does it matter?"

"No," I said, and believed it for as long as it took to say the word, and then didn't, and covered the not-believing it by asking whether she had any of the small white flowers left, the ones I never remember the name of and she never makes me feel foolish for forgetting.

She did. She always does, which I noticed for the first time that morning as a fact rather than a kindness — that in a year of stopping at that stall, she has never once told me a flower I wanted was out of season, out of stock, sold that morning to someone else. I have wondered since whether that is simply what running a small stall in a small town looks like when you keep it well, or whether I had just been handed, without either of us remarking on it, the second piece of a pattern I hadn't yet decided to call a pattern.

"You could tell me," she said, going back to the stems, "if there was someone. Before here. I wouldn't mind knowing. I think I'd mind more, actually, going on not knowing, the longer this goes."

"There isn't anyone to tell you about," I said, and this one I believe I meant completely, which is its own kind of strange, when I think about it now — that the sentence felt entirely true in my mouth and

turned out to be, at absolute best, a sentence about a door I had simply never tried the handle of.

She let it go the way she lets most things go — not dropped, exactly, more set down carefully somewhere she can find it again — and wrapped the white flowers in brown paper with the same three folds she always uses, and told me, as she always does, to say hello to the girls on the rise for her, meaning the bees, a joke that has never once failed to make me smile and which I found myself, for the first time, examining the way you'd examine a coin you suddenly weren't sure was real — not because there was anything wrong with it, but because it had worked, flawlessly, every single time, for a year, and I had never once heard her use it on anyone else. I carried that thought home with the flowers, turning it over the whole walk, the way you turn over a stone you've picked up without quite deciding to keep it, unsure yet whether you're going to put it back down or slip it into your pocket for good.

I walked home with the flowers and no name for what had unsettled me, only the shape of it, the way you can feel the outline of a stone through a boot without being able to say what kind of stone it is. The square was quiet behind me, the dry fountain making the whole evening feel slightly muted, as though someone had turned down a dial I hadn't known was there to turn. Whatever I'd said in my sleep, I couldn't retrieve it. I lay awake some part of that night trying, the way you press a bruise to see if it still hurts, and got nothing back but the sense — familiar by then, though I still didn't have a name for that either — of reaching toward a feeding time I couldn't remember setting.

## **FOUR**

*APIARY LOG — Asha, eighteenth day*

I want to slow down and do this properly, because I've noticed I have a habit — an old one, from before Halden, though I couldn't tell you exactly where I picked it up — of treating a living thing as interesting right up until it becomes inconvenient to keep looking at, and I don't want to do that here. The dish on my counter

deserves better than a glance and a metaphor. So: what it actually is, as best I can lay it out for myself.

It begins as a spore, small enough to ride on wind or water, waiting. It doesn't grow into anything resembling itself until it hatches into something more like an amoeba — a solitary, single-celled thing, entirely ordinary, indistinguishable in ambition from a thousand other microscopic somethings crawling through the same patch of wet leaf litter. On its own, it would stay that way, living out whatever a life that small amounts to, unremarked, unremembered. But when it meets another of its kind that it's compatible with, the two don't mate so much as merge — stop being two cells and become one, and then the strange part starts, because that one cell does not go on to divide into two the way a fertilized egg would. It divides its nucleus instead, over and over, synchronously, thousands of times, without ever building a wall between any of the copies. What results — what's sitting on my counter right now, mid-spread toward the corner of its dish, moving in that slow visible pulse I've come to watch the way other men watch a fire — is not a colony. It is a single cell with thousands of hearts and no skin between any of them, sharing one continuous body the way a bay shares one continuous tide, every part of it touching every other part, nothing held separately enough to call it private.

It doesn't die easily, either. Starve it, dry it out, chill it, and it doesn't perish — it hardens, instead, into a knotted, leathery little husk called a sclerotium, and simply waits, sometimes for years, for the world to become survivable again. Add water to an old sclerotium and, within hours, the thing that was dormant is moving again, foraging, remembering — and I want to be precise about that last word, because I mean it literally, not as a figure of speech. Slime molds trained to tolerate a substance they'd normally avoid have been found, afterward, to be carrying measurably more of that substance inside their own tissue than untrained ones — as though the lesson wasn't filed away as an idea at all, but simply absorbed, kept in the body the way a scar is kept in skin. And that absorbed lesson survives the sclerotium. Put a mold to sleep for a month with that memory already inside it, and it wakes up still knowing what it

knew before it went dormant — not because anything told it, but because it never stopped, even asleep, being made of the thing it learned.

I sat a long while just watching it flow, that evening, the lamp low, the rest of the cottage gone dark around the one small circle of light over the dish, and found myself doing the thing I've noticed I do more and more this year — talking to it, quietly, the way you'd talk to an animal that couldn't understand a word and somehow still seemed to be listening.

I have read, too, about what happens to a creature like this when the world stops being kind to it. It doesn't die the way most living things die. It hardens instead, into a dry, knotted little husk that can sit inert on a shelf for years — through drought, through cold, through however long the world takes to become survivable again — and then, the moment water finally reaches it, simply starts moving, as though no time had passed at all, as though the years in between had happened to someone else entirely and it had only just now been handed the news.

Here is the detail that kept me at the counter that night long after the coffee had gone properly cold, the one I keep coming back to and setting down and picking back up: that memory can be given to a stranger. Take a plasmodium that has learned to tolerate something and fuse it with one that never encountered the substance at all, and the naive portion inherits the tolerance — takes on, through nothing but contact, a lesson it never personally suffered to learn. I don't know what to do with that fact except sit with it. A creature with no brain, no nerve, no single moment it could point to and call my own experience — and it can still hand another creature a memory that isn't theirs, and have that memory take, and be carried forward as if it always belonged to the one now carrying it.

I think about Farrow's file on me, which I have never asked to see and which I understand, now, that I have been afraid to ask to see for reasons that have nothing to do with modesty. I think about the three or four shapes my missing year takes, depending on which morning I try to recall it, none of them agreeing, all of them mine in

the sense that they arrived in my head and nowhere else that I can prove. I don't know which of those shapes, if any, is the sclerotium — the true thing, hardened and waiting, that would wake up and still be itself if the water ever reached it. And I don't know, and this is the part I couldn't say out loud to anyone but this page, whether it would matter, if it turned out that what I was carrying instead was something merely fused into me — real in the tissue, absorbed, load-bearing, and never once, not for a single hour, actually mine.

## **FIVE**

### *TOWN*

I asked Farrow to see my file on a Thursday, which I remember only because Thursdays are when he comes to the cottage instead of having me come to him, and I had decided, somewhere between the bees and the walk down, that I would rather ask a question in a room that wasn't his.

He arrived, as he always does, at exactly the hour he'd said he would, carrying a small paper bag of pastries from the bakery on Larch Street that he never once ate from and I never once refused, and settled into the porch chair he has, over a year, made unofficially his own, angled just enough toward the rise that he could watch the hives while he talked without ever quite seeming to be watching them.

He didn't say no. That's the thing about Farrow I have never quite gotten a grip on — he almost never says no to anything, and somehow you leave every conversation with him having gotten less than you asked for anyway.

"There isn't a file the way you're picturing one," he said, setting his cup down on the porch rail with the particular care of a man who has never once chipped a cup and doesn't intend to start. "There's an intake summary. There's a care plan, which you've seen, or could see, any time you asked — you never have, which I've always found more telling than anything I could put in a summary myself." He smiled when he said it, not unkindly. Farrow is never unkind. It is, I've come to think, the most unsettling thing about him. "What is it you're actually hoping to find, Teo?"

"A name," I said. "Something with an r in it. I said it in my sleep."

Something moved in his face, there and gone fast enough that I could have imagined it, and I have spent more hours than I'd like to admit since, trying to decide whether I did. He looked, for that half-second, not like a man withholding an answer but like a man deciding, in real time, which of several true things would do the least damage said aloud. "People say all kinds of things in their sleep," he said. "It rarely means what we want it to mean when we're awake and looking for a reason."

"That's not an answer."

"No," he agreed, easily, the way he agrees with almost everything I put to him directly, which somehow never once feels like losing an argument on his end. "It isn't. I'll tell you what I can tell you, which is that nothing in your history is being kept from you out of anything worse than caution. You came to us in a state where more information would have done you harm before it did you good. That threshold moves. It's been moving. I don't think it's unreasonable to ask you to trust the pace a little longer, given how far you've come on it."

I have turned that sentence over more times than I could count, in the weeks since, and I still can't decide what bothers me about it — whether it's the sentence itself, which is reasonable enough on its face, or the ease of it, the sense that it had been said before, by him, to someone, possibly to me, possibly more than once, and simply hadn't needed a single word changed to fit this Thursday as well as it must have fit some earlier one. I have started keeping a private list, in the back pages of the same notebook I use for the log, of sentences Farrow says that sound, on reflection, too well-worn for a conversation he's claiming to be having with me for the first time. It is a short list. It is growing.

"Adela asked about it too," I said. "The name."

"Did she." He said it the way you'd note rain in a forecast that had already promised rain — information received, filed, nothing in it that required a change of plans. "What did you tell her?"

"That there wasn't anyone to tell her about."

“And do you believe that?”

I hadn't expected the question turned back on me quite that directly, and I found I didn't have a ready answer, which he seemed to take, correctly, as an answer of its own. He finished his coffee, unhurried, the way he does everything, and set the cup down with that same care for the porch rail, as though the wood itself might bruise. He asked, in the same gentle unbothered voice as always, how the hives were settling, and I told him about Asha's quiet morning, leaving out the part about the reaching in the dish, for reasons I couldn't have explained to him any better than I can explain them to this page — only that it had started to feel like the one thing in my life that was still entirely mine to withhold, and I had grown, without quite deciding to, protective of having at least one. He left the way he always leaves, unhurried, without looking back once, and I stood at the gate a long time after his car had gone, listening to the wind move through the tops of the elms and finding, for once, that I had nothing at all to say to it.

## SIX

*APIARY LOG — Asha, twenty-third day*

I did something a little foolish tonight, and I want to write it down honestly, foolishness and all, because I think the honest version is the only one worth keeping.

Farrow's back room still has the rest of the teaching culture I took my portion from — a second dish, same origin, kept apart from mine and, as far as I can tell, fed on a schedule I've never once seen written down anywhere, which is either meaningless or exactly the kind of thing I've started noticing everything as being one or the other of. I asked to borrow a piece of it. He didn't ask why. I've stopped being sure whether that's generosity or just Farrow being Farrow.

Here's the plain version of what a creature like this actually is, since I promised myself I'd stop hiding behind the harder words for it. It isn't an animal and it isn't a plant, and it isn't really a single thing the way we mean the word most of the time. It starts out as something closer to a very simple, ordinary crawling cell — millions

of them exist all around us, in wet dirt, doing nothing remarkable at all. But when two of the right kind happen to meet, they don't stay two. They join into one, and then that one just keeps growing — not by making more cells, but by copying whatever sits at its center, over and over, inside the same unbroken skin, so that what you end up with is a single body with no inner walls at all, everything touching everything else, nothing separate from anything else in reach. That's what was sitting in each of my two dishes tonight. Two separate bodies, same origin, that had simply never happened to meet.

I set the two dishes side by side on the counter, close enough that their rims nearly touched, and watched them a while before I did anything at all, the lamp low again, the house quiet around me the way it gets past midnight when even the wind seems to have gone somewhere else for the night. Then I pushed them together at the edges, just barely, with the flat of a knife, the way you'd nudge two spilled drops of water until they became one drop.

They didn't fight, and they didn't stay apart. The first touch happened at a single point, no wider than a thread, and from there the joining moved outward on its own, faster than I'd expected, a slow visible tide running both directions at once until there was no longer any way to say where one had ended and the other begun. Within the hour they had become a single spreading shape, no seam where the two had joined, no way for me to point at any part of it now and say that piece came from the other dish. Whatever the borrowed piece had been fed on, whatever small chemical habits it had picked up sitting alone in Farrow's back room for however many weeks — those habits are, as far as I understand it, now simply part of what my piece is too. Not remembered. Not told. Just true of it now, the way a scar is true of skin that never asked for the cut that made it.

I sat with that for a long time before I put the dish down and went to bed. I found myself thinking, absurdly, of the year I've spent in Halden as a dish of my own — set down beside some other life I'll never see the shape of, close enough that the two of us might have simply been nudged together at some point I wasn't present for,

and joined so cleanly that neither of us would ever be able to point to the seam. It is not a comfortable thought to fall asleep to. I fell asleep to it anyway, because by then I no longer had the energy to hold it at arm's length.

What woke me wasn't the dish. It was the ordinary thing I did on the way out this morning, walking the same path down to the road that I've walked every day for a year without looking at it properly even once — and finding, at the crook where the path bends past the old stone wall, a line of ants running so straight and so certain that I stopped in the middle of my own step to watch them, the way you'd stop for a sound in a house you'd stopped expecting to hear anything new from at all.

I don't know why that was the morning I finally looked down. I only know that once I had, I couldn't make myself stop, and that whatever I found there, over the days that followed, was not going to let me go back to the dish on my counter, or to Farrow's careful Thursday sentences, or to anything else in Halden, as an entirely separate thing again. I stood over that line of ants for the better part of ten minutes, late already for the hives, and felt something in my chest shift, quietly, the way a house settles overnight without ever once making a sound loud enough to wake the person sleeping in it.

## **SEVEN**

### *TOWN*

I started leaving ten minutes earlier for the hives, which I told myself was about the light and was actually about the ants.

They run along the crook of the stone wall in a line so straight it looks drawn with a ruler, small and dark and constant, a little dip in their column where the mortar has worn away and a little rise where it hasn't, the whole procession moving with a patience that has nothing hurried in it despite how quickly any single ant is moving. For the first few mornings I assumed, the way you assume most things you've never had reason to look at closely, that this was simply what ants did — that the line was built into them somehow, fixed, the way a river doesn't have to think about which

way is downhill. It isn't like that at all, and once I understood how it actually works I couldn't unsee how strange it is.

An ant doesn't know the way anywhere. It finds food mostly by wandering, the way you'd feel your way across a dark room, and when it finds something worth carrying home, it lays down a little trail of scent behind it on the walk back, step by step, so faint you or I would never catch it. The next ant that crosses that scent doesn't know what it means, exactly — it just finds itself a little more likely to walk that way instead of some other way, and if it finds food too, it lays down its own trail on top of the first, making the path a little stronger, a little easier for the next ant to notice. Do that enough times, with enough ants, and what looks like a single decision — this is the way to go — turns out to be thousands of small, uncertain, individually meaningless choices, stacked on top of each other until they add up to a straight line.

I crouched by the wall most mornings that week before work, watching them, close enough to see the small hesitations in an individual ant's path — a slight veer, a brief doubling back, a pause at a crack in the mortar that every other ant that day had walked straight past without noticing. None of it looked purposeful. All of it, taken together, over enough mornings, looked exactly like purpose, which is either the most reassuring thing I've learned all year or the most unsettling, depending which hour of the night I happen to be turning it over.

I told Adela about it that evening, standing at her stall while she wrapped the last of the day's stems, and she listened the way she listens to most things I bring her — attentively, a little amused, waiting to see where I'm going with it before deciding whether to take it seriously.

"So there's no ant in charge," she said. "No one deciding it's a good path."

"No one at all. It just becomes the good path, because enough of them happened to agree, one at a time, without any of them meaning to agree on anything."

"That's either very hopeful," she said, "or the saddest thing you've told me all week, and I genuinely can't decide which."

I laughed, because it was the kind of thing she says that's built to make you laugh, but I thought about it longer than the moment called for, walking home. I have spent a year in Halden doing, more or less, whatever seemed like the next reasonable thing — the bakery at the same hour, the stall on the same three days, Farrow's Thursdays, Adela's little joke about the girls on the rise — and it occurred to me, walking past the very wall where I'd first noticed the ants, that I had never once asked myself whether any of it was a path I'd chosen or simply one I had, without meaning to, helped keep worn smooth by walking it the same way enough times in a row.

There is a difference, I think, between a life that has a shape because someone gave it one, and a life that has a shape because it was never once given a reason to have a different one. I couldn't have told you, that evening, which kind of life I was standing in the middle of. I still couldn't tell you with certainty now. I have turned the question over enough times since that it has started to feel less like a question and more like a room I keep walking back into, checking the same corners, finding them exactly as I left them. But I remember that it was the first time the question had occurred to me in those particular words, walking home in the last of the light with flowers Adela had picked for me without my having to ask, past a wall where a thousand small uncertain choices had already, invisibly, made themselves into something that looked, from a distance, exactly like a decision.

## **EIGHT**

*APIARY LOG — Asha, thirtieth day*

A trail like the one along the wall doesn't last unless it's used. That's the part I hadn't understood at first, and it turns out to matter more than the trail itself. I tested it, in a small and probably unscientific way — marked the strongest stretch of the path with a chalk line one evening and simply didn't walk near it for two days, curious whether the ants would notice my absence at all, or

whether the path had never had anything to do with me in the first place.

The scent an ant leaves behind isn't permanent. It fades on its own, steadily, whether or not anything happens to it — which means a path stays strong only as long as enough ants keep walking it and topping it back up. Stop using a path, even a good one, even one that used to lead somewhere worth going, and within a day or two there's nothing left of it at all. The colony doesn't hold a meeting to decide the old path is worse than a new one. It simply, gradually, forgets — and forgetting, here, isn't a flaw in the system. It's the only way the system stays able to find something better than what it already knew.

I keep turning that over. A living arrangement that can only keep discovering new things because it's also, constantly, quietly, letting the old ones go.

There's a second piece, stranger to me than the first. Ants don't actually follow a scent trail with anything like precision — they follow it approximately, veering off it slightly, more than you'd expect from a system that depends on accuracy to survive. I watched for this specifically, after I'd read about it, crouched by the wall long enough on a Sunday that a neighbor came out to ask if I was quite well. For a long time this looked to the people studying it like simple clumsiness, a design too crude to do better. But watch long enough and you start to see what the sloppiness buys them: an ant who wanders slightly off the known path is the one who occasionally stumbles onto a better path nobody had found yet. A colony made of perfectly obedient followers would walk the same good-enough route forever. A colony that lets a certain number of its members wander imprecisely finds the better route eventually, almost by accident, and then simply — through the same fading and reinforcing as everything else — makes the accident permanent.

I want to be careful here, more careful than I've been in these pages so far, because I've noticed myself doing something I don't entirely trust. I keep writing about what the ants are "doing" as though I know what any of it is like from the inside — as though

strategy and mistake and forgetting mean the same thing to an ant that they mean to me, sitting here with a notebook and a year I can't fully account for. They almost certainly don't. Nobody who studies these creatures seriously believes an ant experiences anything I'd recognize as a decision, or a memory, or a doubt. I have no way of knowing whether there's anything it is like to be one of them at all — whether the wandering ant feels anything remotely like curiosity, or whether "wandering" is simply a shape a body makes, with no one home behind it to call it anything. It is, I've come to understand, an old and largely automatic habit of minds like mine — reaching for a human shape to press over whatever we're watching, whether or not the shape actually fits, because a mind that tells no stories about what it sees has no way of remembering what it saw at all.

I went back on the third morning and found the chalk line still there, faint under the dew, and the ants gone from it entirely — not scattered, not confused, simply elsewhere, following some newer, stronger scent that had built itself up in my absence without any help from me at all. It should not have surprised me. It did anyway.

Which leaves me somewhere uncomfortable. I've spent a month now finding my own life in the shapes these creatures make — reading habit into a scent trail, choice into an error, forgetting into a chemical that simply evaporates because that's what chemicals do. I don't actually know if any of that is true of the ants. I know it's true of the story I've been telling myself about the ants, which is a different thing, and possibly the only thing a mind like mine is built to produce — meaning, whether or not there's any meaning actually there to find. I don't know yet whether that should make me trust what I've been noticing about my own life a little less, or whether it's the closest thing to an honest warning I'm going to get before I trust it a great deal more.

## NINE

### TOWN

The trail moved. Not faded — moved, cleanly, overnight, from the crook by the old stone wall to a line eight feet further down, running instead along the base of Adela's garden fence, as if the wall had simply stopped being worth the walk. I nearly missed it entirely, walking past at my usual pace with my mind on the day ahead, and only caught it because some part of me had apparently learned, without my noticing, to glance at the old spot out of habit — and found nothing there at all, not one ant, the mortar bare and undisturbed as if it had never held a single one of them.

I stood over it longer than a reasonable man stands over an insect trail on his way to work. I thought about the fading I'd written up the night before — how a path only holds if something keeps using it — and understood, in the way you understand a thing in your body before your head catches up to it, that I was looking at proof of my own paragraph, laid out in the grass like it had been left there for me on purpose, which I knew, even as I thought it, was exactly the kind of thought a man in my position should learn to distrust.

I stood at the new line a long while, crouched the way I'd crouched at the old one, watching the same steady procession running along a fence I must have walked past three hundred times without once looking down. It should have felt like nothing more than an insect changing its route for reasons entirely its own. It felt, instead, like watching a stage crew reset a scene between acts, quietly, competently, certain no one in the audience would think to check the seams.

I mentioned it to Farrow that Thursday, mostly to watch his face.

"Ants," he said, in the tone of a man confirming a fact he already possessed. "Yes. There's a nest under the fence there — has been for years, I'm told. They do move their routes."

"You knew that. About the fence."

"I know most things about this town that have been true for years, Teo. It isn't a large town." He said it lightly, the way he says most

things, and I could not, turning it over afterward, find a single word in the sentence I could reasonably object to — and could not, either, shake the feeling that I had just watched a door close so gently I'd nearly missed the sound of the latch. I thought about it the rest of that walk home, and the walk after that, and found that the sentence had lodged itself somewhere I couldn't easily dig it back out of, the way a splinter sits just under the skin long after the moment you got it has been forgotten.

## TEN

*APIARY LOG — Asha, thirty-eighth day*

I saw the worst version of it three days ago, and I haven't been able to write about it until now.

Not our ants — a different nest, out past the millpond, a species I don't know the name of and haven't looked up, because for once I didn't want the plain explanation before I'd let myself sit with the thing itself. A ring of them, dozens deep, circling a bare patch of dirt no wider than a cartwheel, moving fast, moving in perfect order, going nowhere at all. The sound of it, once I crouched close enough to hear it, was almost nothing — a dry, papery rustle, thousands of small legs against packed earth, steady as rain on a roof. I watched for the better part of an hour, crouched at the edge of the millpond path with my knees going stiff beneath me and not caring in the slightest. They did not stop. They did not slow. Some had clearly been at it far longer than I had been watching, because the ring was littered, at its edges, with ones that had simply stopped moving where they fell, and still the others ran on and over them, unbothered, unable, I understood eventually, to register the stillness as anything worth changing course for.

I looked it up that night, unable to leave it alone after all, sitting at the kitchen counter with the lamp burning down and the dish of mold quiet in its corner, no longer the strangest thing in the room. I found what I'd half suspected — that this happens when a group loses the main trail and starts following one another instead of the path itself. Each ant lays down the same scent it's been following, on top of the scent of the one ahead of it, so the circle only gets

stronger the longer it runs. There is no ant in the ring making a mistake it could correct if it noticed. There is no ant positioned to notice anything at all. The rule that built the good trail — follow the scent, trust the one ahead of you — is the exact same rule that builds this, when the world underneath it happens to loop back on itself. It isn't a different kind of ant, gone wrong. It's the same good rule, run in the one shape that turns it into a trap with no door.

I walked back from the millpond that evening slower than I'd walked out, past houses with their lamps already lit, past the bakery gone dark for the night, and found myself measuring my own stride against the memory of that ring, wondering how a man would know, from the inside of his own life, whether he was walking a straight road toward somewhere or simply following the back of whoever happened to be a few steps ahead of him, trusting the shape of the path because the alternative — stopping, looking up, admitting he couldn't see past the next bend — was worse than not looking at all.

I keep a colony of animals whose only method for finding anything true is trusting whoever came before them. I have spent a year in a town that has never once, that I've been able to prove, asked me to trust anything but the person who came before me. I don't know how to finish that sentence in a way that doesn't frighten me more than I want to admit to this page, so I'm going to stop here and go check on Asha, who at least, this morning, is still finding her own way home.

## **ELEVEN**

### *TOWN*

I told Adela about the ring at the millpond, mostly because I needed to tell someone and couldn't imagine saying it to Farrow. She listened with her hands gone still over the buckets for once, no stems, no sorting, the whole of her attention on me in a way that made the telling harder rather than easier.

She was quiet longer than I expected before she answered. "Do you think that's what we look like," she said, "from somewhere far

enough up. All of us in this town, going round and round something, congratulating ourselves on the view.”

“I don’t know what we look like from up there,” I said. “I’m not sure anyone gets to know that about their own life while they’re still inside it.”

“But you’d want to know. If you could.”

It wasn’t really a question, the way she said it, and I understood, standing there with the last of the day’s light going soft on the water behind the stall, that she wasn’t only asking about ants, and that I had, for the first time since I’d known her, no idea at all which answer would actually be true if I gave it.

“I don’t know,” I said, which was the only honest thing available to me, and watched something in her face settle into an expression I couldn’t read — not disappointed, exactly, and not relieved either. Just settled, the way water settles once you’ve stopped disturbing it, into whatever shape it was always going to take once you stopped watching it closely enough to see the moment it happened.

I walked home past the fence line, past the new trail running steady and untroubled along Adela’s garden, the evening gone the particular blue it goes right before the streetlamps take over from the sky, and thought, for the first time in a year, that I would like to go up to the hives tomorrow not to inspect them, exactly, but to simply sit with Asha for a while and watch her work, the way you’d sit with the one friend left who you were fairly sure had never once told you anything that wasn’t true.

## **TWELVE**

*APIARY LOG — Asha, forty-fourth day*

I want to tell you something about the comb that took me a long time to believe, even standing in front of it, frame in hand, the wax still warm enough from the cluster’s own body heat that I could feel it faintly through my glove.

The cells aren’t built as hexagons. I’d always assumed some instinct in the bees knew the shape it was aiming for and simply built toward it, the way a mason knows the wall he’s laying before

the first brick goes down. That isn't what happens. A bee starts each cell as a plain circle — nothing more complicated than a tube pressed into soft wax — and packs those circles close together, side by side, the way you'd pack a tray of full cups. Then the bees warm the wax with the heat of their own crowded bodies until it softens and starts to flow, just slightly, like something between a liquid and a very slow-moving solid, and where three circles press against each other, the walls between them settle on their own into flat, straight lines, meeting at the same angle every time. Nobody measures it. Nobody corrects it. The circles simply can't hold their round shape once they're touching and warm, and the shape they fall into instead — the one that wastes the least wax and holds the most honey — happens to be a perfect hexagon.

There is no bee anywhere in the hive that could draw you a hexagon, or explain to another bee why one is better than a square. The shape isn't a decision at all. It's what heat does to circles that are close enough together and soft enough to move.

I have been thinking of that hexagon as the most ordered thing in my life — steady, exact, worked out in advance — since the day I first learned to read a frame. It has never once occurred to me, until tonight, that “ordered” and “designed” might not be the same word, and that the most perfect shape I know might exist entirely without anyone, anywhere, having planned it.

I don't know why that thought arrived with a name attached to it, but it did — not the name from before, the one with the r in it, but a different one, a woman's, said in a voice I don't recognize as mine or as anyone else's I could place, saying only it isn't your fault the shape came out that way. I wrote it down exactly as it came, because I've learned by now not to trust myself to remember it correctly a second time, and because three memories that don't agree are still, I've decided, worth more than none at all. I sat with the notebook open a long while after, the lamp burning down low, listening to the ordinary creak of the cottage settling around me, and found I had nothing else to add — only the sentence itself, sitting there on the page, refusing to explain what it meant or where it had come from.

## THIRTEEN

### TOWN

Asha swarmed on a Tuesday, without warning, the way they're supposed to and almost never actually do.

I heard it before I understood what I was hearing — that low urgent pitch I'd read about and never once heard in a year of quiet, ordinary mornings — and by the time I'd gotten the veil over my face half the colony was already in the air above the rise, a moving column loud enough to feel in my chest, wheeling once over the cottage and then, with no signal I could see or hear, turning as one and heading down toward the square.

I ran after them. I want that on the record plainly, without dressing it up — a grown man in a beekeeper's jacket, boots slapping the cobbles, veil half-fastened and flapping loose against my collar, running full out through Halden's narrow streets, chasing a cloud of ten thousand animals that did not care in the slightest whether he kept up. My lungs were burning by the time I reached the square, and I didn't slow. People came to their windows, shutters thrown back, a few of them laughing, one calling out something I didn't catch and didn't stop to ask about. Adela came out of the stall with shears still in her hand and stood in the middle of the street, watching them pass overhead with an expression I hadn't seen on her before, something closer to wonder than to worry.

They settled, finally, on the low branch of the plane tree in the square, a fist-sized knot of bees that grew, within minutes, into something the size of a man's torso, hanging there in plain sight of the whole town while I stood underneath it, breathing hard, trying to remember the proper way to coax a swarm into a box without saying anything else out loud that I couldn't take back.

A crowd had gathered by then, a loose ring of townsfolk at a respectful distance, murmuring the way people murmur at a fire that isn't quite dangerous enough to run from. I fetched a spare box from the cottage — running the whole way back, and back again — and set it beneath the branch, and gave the limb one firm, decisive shake, the way you're taught, trusting the whole mass of

them to drop in a single motion rather than scatter into the crowd. It worked. It always works, or it never works at all, and there is no way to know in advance which kind of afternoon you're standing in until the branch is already moving under your hand. Ten thousand bees fell as one dark weight into the box, and the sound of it — a soft, heavy thud, more like a sack of grain than anything alive — is a sound I don't think I'll forget for as long as I keep bees at all.

What I remember most clearly isn't the catching. It's the ten minutes before it, standing under that tree with the whole knot of them humming just above my head, and understanding — really understanding, for the first time since I'd come to Halden — that nothing about what I was watching had been arranged for my benefit. No one had scheduled this. No one, as far as I could tell, had wanted it to happen at all, least of all the Trust, whose research notes I'd have to explain this to by evening. It was simply bees, doing the one thing bees do that no one in this town, however carefully they'd built everything else around me, could have staged in advance and made look this loud, this chaotic, this entirely their own.

I boxed them before dusk, the crowd thinning slowly around me as the excitement wore off into ordinary evening errands, until it was just Adela and me and the box and the long blue shadow of the plane tree stretching most of the way across the square. Adela walked back with me, quiet the whole way, and at my door she said, "That's the first time all year I've seen you look like you were somewhere real," and I didn't have an answer for that either, only the feeling of it landing somewhere I hadn't braced for.

## **FOURTEEN**

*APIARY LOG — Asha, forty-ninth day*

I pulled the first frames for harvest today, later in the season than I meant to, the extractor set up on the cottage floor and the whole room gone thick and gold-smelling by the time I'd finished, wax under my nails for days afterward no matter how I scrub. I want to write down why this matters more to me than it probably should to anyone else reading it.

The uncapping alone takes the better part of an evening — running a warmed knife along each frame to shave away the thin wax seals the bees have laid over every finished cell, a motion that has to be slow and even or you tear the comb beneath it, and then the frames go into the extractor, four at a time, spinning until the honey flies free of the wax by nothing more than its own weight thrown outward, the whole apparatus groaning like something much older than it actually is. By the time I'd finished tonight my arms ached in a way that felt, oddly, like the good kind of tired — the kind that comes from a task with an honest beginning and an honest end, which I have come to value more than I ever expected to, given how few things in this year of mine have offered me either.

No two years of honey are ever the same, and it isn't sentiment that makes that true — it's chemistry. What a hive produces depends entirely on which flowers were blooming, in what order, in what weather, across however many miles the foragers happened to range that particular season. A dry spring gives you something darker and more concentrated. A wet one gives you something paler and milder. The exact mix of pollen caught in the honey is specific enough that trained analysts can look at a sample under a microscope and tell you, with real confidence, not just what region it came from but roughly what time of year — a kind of fingerprint that nobody sat down and designed, made instead from ten thousand small, unrepeatable decisions about which bloom was worth the flight.

Which means this year's honey, sitting in jars on my counter tonight, could not be faked in advance. Not by Farrow, not by anyone with a file and a plan and a year's head start. A trained eye, I've read, can look at the pollen caught in a sample under a microscope and tell you not just the region it came from but roughly the week of the season, the way a signature tells you a hand rather than a name. You cannot write the recipe for a season before the season has happened. You can only let it happen and see what it left behind.

I have been keeping a jar from every harvest since I arrived, unopened, more out of habit than intention, and tonight I lined all

three up on the counter and looked at them the way you'd look at years of a life laid end to end — each one a slightly different color, each one, if I opened it, a slightly different weight on the tongue, and every difference between them proof of a season that happened whether or not anyone was watching closely enough to have arranged it. I don't have many things in this life I can say that about. I have these three jars, and I intend to keep every one I'm given from here on, the way another man might keep photographs, lined up in a row on a shelf somewhere I can find them easily on the nights I need reminding that at least one part of my year happened honestly, from first bloom to last, with nobody's hand anywhere on the scale.

## **FIFTEEN**

### *TOWN*

Farrow came by unscheduled, which he has never done before, arriving on foot rather than in the car, his coat still buttoned against a chill that had mostly burned off by midmorning, as though he'd left in more of a hurry than he wanted me to notice. He stood on my porch with his hands folded in a way that made me brace for something before he'd said a single word.

"You had a swarm," he said. "I heard. I wanted to see that you were all right."

"You could have asked on Thursday."

"I could have," he agreed, and didn't explain the difference, which by now I've learned to read as its own kind of answer. He looked past me, into the kitchen, where the three jars were still lined up on the counter from the night before, and something in his face did the thing I'd started to think of as the flicker — there and controlled again before I could be sure I'd seen it at all. He set his coffee down without drinking it, for once, and looked out at the rise for a long moment before he spoke, which was itself unlike him — Farrow rarely pauses before a sentence, the way a man rarely pauses before reciting something he's said many times before. "You've kept every harvest," he said. "That's unusual. Most keepers sell it on."

"I like having something with a date on it that I know is true."

He didn't ask what I meant by that, which told me he already understood it better than I'd wanted him to. "There was a woman," he said instead, quietly, in a voice that didn't match any of his Thursday sentences at all. "Before Halden. I'm not going to tell you her name, Teo, because I don't believe you're ready for it and I have been wrong about that exact judgment call once before in my career, badly enough that I don't intend to be wrong about it twice. But I wanted you to hear that much from me, plainly, rather than keep finding pieces of her in your own sleep and wondering if you're inventing them."

"Was it my fault," I said finally, "whatever happened to her."

Farrow was quiet long enough that the question felt, by the time he answered it, like it had grown a second, harder meaning underneath the first. "I don't think fault is a word that's ever done anyone in your position much good, Teo. I've watched it do a great deal of harm." He looked out at the rise, at Asha's box just visible above the hedge line, and something in his shoulders eased slightly, the way a man's does when he's decided to say less rather than more. "I'll tell you this much, because I think you've earned at least this much. Whatever happened, it wasn't the kind of thing a single choice causes. It was the kind of thing that happens to a life over years, quietly, the way a hive can look perfectly healthy for a long while before you understand how much trouble it's already in."

"That's not an answer either."

"No," he said again, gently, the way he agrees with nearly everything I put to him. "It's the truest thing I have to give you today. I hope, eventually, it's enough."

I stood very still on my own porch and could not, for a long moment, make myself ask the only question that mattered, because some part of me had already understood that whatever answer he gave next, true or not, was going to be the one I'd have no way of checking.

## SIXTEEN

### *APIARY LOG — Asha, fifty-fifth day*

I keep coming back to the piping — the sound Asha's scouts make in the grass in the hour before a decision gets made, the one I first read about and finally, this year, got to hear with my own ears, a thin, urgent, almost mechanical note, nothing like the low contented hum of an ordinary afternoon, closer to something you'd expect from a machine winding itself up than from an animal. It isn't a vote in any sense a person would recognize. No scout counts the others. They simply keep dancing for whichever site they favor, more or less strongly depending on how good it seemed to them, until enough of them happen to be dancing for the same place at once that something like a threshold gets crossed, and only then does the piping start, and only then does the whole cluster lift as one. Nobody is in charge of noticing when that threshold arrives. It simply arrives, the way water simply boils, and every bee in the swarm responds to a decision that no single one of them made and all of them, together, somehow did.

I have started to wonder, writing that down, whether that's the most honest kind of democracy there is — nobody choosing, and yet a choice getting made that serves the colony better, on average, over the long run of its history, than any single scout's judgment could have managed alone. I think about this more than I probably should while I'm falling asleep — a whole town run the same way, no single hand on the tiller anywhere, every choice simply the residue of enough small pressures agreeing at once. It would not, I've realized, even need to be unkind to work exactly the way it's worked on me. It would only need enough people, each doing their own small reasonable thing, for none of them to be the one responsible for the shape it all adds up to.

And then I have to stop myself, the way I've had to stop myself with the ants, because I don't actually know what any of this is like for Asha's bees, and I'm less sure than I used to be that the question is even a foolish one to ask. There's real, serious research now — not sentiment, actual careful studies — suggesting bees may weigh a kind of pain against a kind of reward when deciding whether to

push through a hazard for something worth having, the way you or I might grit our teeth and reach past a hot pan for something we wanted badly enough. The researchers who found it were careful to say what it doesn't prove. Finding that a creature makes a trade-off doesn't tell you whether there's anyone home experiencing the cost side of that trade-off, or whether it's simply a very well-built machine performing the shape of caution without any of the feeling underneath.

There is a study I keep returning to, done with bumblebees rather than honeybees but close enough in kind that I don't think the distinction matters to the question underneath it — researchers offering the animals a reward worth having, but only past an obstacle built to cost them something, testing whether the bees would learn to weigh the cost against the prize the way a creature capable of minding pain might. They did. They learned it, adjusted for it, made the kind of trade a person makes reaching past discomfort for something worth having. The scientists were careful, reading the paper, not to claim more than the data could hold — a trade-off proves a trade-off, nothing further, and whether there is anyone actually present to feel the cost side of that trade is a question the experiment was never built to answer and, by its own admission, couldn't have answered even if it had tried.

I have spent a year loving this hive the way you'd love a friend who has never once lied to you, and I do not actually know, and by every honest account I can find, no one currently does know, whether that love is landing on anyone at all. I don't know if that should frighten me more than the anomalies do, or less. Some nights it feels like the exact same fear, wearing two different coats.

## **SEVENTEEN**

### *TOWN*

I told Adela what Farrow had said — that there was a woman, before, and a name he wouldn't give me — standing at her stall in the last of the evening light with the fountain running again behind us, its noise filling the silences I couldn't. She set down the stems

she was holding, slowly, and went very quiet in a way that had nothing performed in it at all.

"Do you want to know," she said, finally. "Really. Not the version of you that says yes because it sounds like the right answer. The actual version, standing here."

"I don't know," I said, for the second time in as many weeks, and this time she didn't let it go the way water settling.

She set the shears down on the counter, carefully, the way she sets down anything she wants to give her full attention to, and for a moment neither of us said anything at all, the fountain filling the silence the way it always does now that it's running again.

"I think about that more than you'd guess," she said. "Whether I'd want to know things about myself, if there were things to know. I have gaps too, Teo. Small ones. A year that doesn't sit quite right when I try to walk back through it. I've never told you that, because I didn't know what I'd be asking you to do with it, and I still don't." She looked at me then, and for the first time since I'd known her I saw something in her face that wasn't calibrated for my benefit at all — just a woman, tired, honestly unsure, standing in a doorway of her own. "Maybe we're both circling something," she said. "And maybe the kindest thing either of us can do is not to be the specific place the other one's mill closes."

I didn't understand the reference until later that night, lying awake, and when I did I lay there a long time with my heart going harder than the thought should have earned, because I had never told her about the ants at the millpond. Not the ring, not the word mill. Not once. I went back over every conversation we'd had that week, trying to find the gap where I might have said it without remembering, the way you check your pockets twice for a key you're already fairly sure you've lost, and found nothing — no seam, no likely moment, nothing but the plain fact of the word sitting in her mouth as though it had always belonged there, waiting for the right night to be used.

## EIGHTEEN

*APIARY LOG — Asha, sixty-first day*

The bees came in early today, hours before I'd have called it, agitated at the entrance in a way I've learned, this year, to take seriously rather than explain away — a tight, restless clustering at the board, wings going faster than the temperature could account for, guards turning away foragers who would normally have been waved through without a second look. No storm on the horizon that I could see. No cloud worth the name. Just a stillness in the air that felt, standing in the middle of it, less like calm than like held breath, and a hive that seemed to know something about the sky that I didn't yet have the instrument to measure.

I stood on the rise a long time after I'd finished closing them in, looking at a horizon that gave me nothing to go on, the light gone flat and colorless in a way I didn't have a proper word for, and thought about the hexagon that no one designed, and the trail that only holds if you keep walking it, and a jar of honey that could not have been written in advance by anyone, however patient, however much time they'd had to prepare. I thought, too, about Adela's word — mill — arriving in her mouth from nowhere I could account for, and about a name with an r in it that Farrow still wouldn't give me, and about how very little, when I added it all up, I actually knew for certain about anything in Halden except the weight of a hive box and the particular, specific way the light falls on a comb at the end of a long season.

Something was coming. I didn't have a name for it yet either. But for the first time since the dish on my counter had first reached toward an hour it had no business remembering, I understood that whatever arrived would be too large for me to hold in a jar and study afterward at my leisure — that some things, unlike a season of honey, don't wait politely to be understood after the fact.

## NINETEEN

### TOWN

The bees came home for good two days later, all of them, hours before dusk, streaming back to the boards in numbers thick enough to hear from the porch, a low continuous roar that didn't taper off the way it usually does as evening comes on. They did not go out again the next morning at all.

I've read enough by now to know the mechanism, or at least the shape of it — that bees are sensitive to the air itself, to the slow drop in pressure that comes ahead of real weather, and will pack a hive in tight and wait it out before a storm most people wouldn't yet think to worry about. What I hadn't expected was how it would feel to stand on the rise and realize the insects understood something about the coming day that the town underneath them, going about its ordinary Thursday, showed no sign of knowing at all.

I said as much to Farrow, who had come again unscheduled, standing at my gate with his collar up against a wind that hadn't picked up yet but was clearly, to anyone paying attention, about to.

"They're sensible animals," he said. "They read the air better than we do. There's nothing sinister in that, Teo."

"I didn't say sinister."

"You didn't have to. I've watched your face do the arithmetic every time something in this town turns out to be more orderly than you expected it to be." He said it without unkindness, which somehow made it worse. "Not everything that lines up is a design. Sometimes a thing is simply true, and happens, on a Thursday, to also be convenient for the story you've started telling yourself."

"And if I can't tell the difference anymore. Between the two."

"Then you're in good company," he said, and for once there was nothing gentle in it at all, only something that sounded, for the length of a single sentence, almost like tiredness of his own. "I'm not sure anyone in Halden could tell you with certainty which is which. Myself included, some weeks."

I didn't have an answer for him that didn't sound, even to my own ear, exactly like the paranoia he was describing. I watched him walk back down toward the square, upright against a wind that had, in the few minutes we'd stood there, gone from nothing to something, his coat snapping once, hard, at the corner where Larch Street bends toward the bakery, and thought that I had never once, in a year of Thursdays, heard him say a single sentence that wasn't perfectly, maddeningly reasonable on its own terms. I went back up to the hives after he'd gone and stood with them a long while, the light gone strange and yellow-green the way it does before real weather, every bird in Halden gone suddenly, oddly quiet.

## TWENTY

*APIARY LOG — Asha, night before*

I want to write down something about storms before this one arrives, because I think it's the truest thing I've learned all year, and because I suspect I won't have the steadiness to think about it clearly once the wind is actually here.

I can hear the wind picking up already, testing the shutters, a low first draft of whatever is coming tomorrow. Weather looks random. It isn't, not really — not in the sense of dice or coin flips. The rules that govern it are fixed and exact, the same equations behaving the same way every time you run them. And yet no one has ever been able to predict weather very far ahead, not because the rules are hidden, but because of what happens when you start two versions of the same storm from conditions that differ by an amount too small to ever measure. Those two versions don't stay close together. They pull apart, faster and faster, until within a matter of days they've become two entirely different skies, with no fingerprint left anywhere to prove they ever shared a beginning. I keep thinking of it as two roads leaving the same gate, walked by two men who set off a single heartbeat apart, arriving, weeks later, in towns that don't appear on the same map. A system can follow rules perfectly, every single time, and still be, for all practical purposes, impossible to see coming.

I have turned that fact over more than any other this year, because it does something I didn't expect a fact to do: it takes away the one test I'd been quietly saving, somewhere in the back of my mind, for the night I finally worked up the nerve to use it. I had told myself that if the storm behaved strangely — too neat, too convenient, too much like weather that had been arranged — I would know, finally, with something like proof, what kind of place I've been living in. But a storm can be entirely real, entirely un-designed, obeying nothing but honest physics from first gust to last drop, and still be impossible for me to tell apart from a very good forgery of one. The chaos and the counterfeit would look, from where I'm standing, exactly the same.

I don't know what to do with that except go to bed and wait for morning, the way every honest man in the path of a real storm has ever had to.

## **TWENTY-ONE**

### *TOWN*

It came in hard, just after midnight, rain first and then something with more weight behind it, the elms along the square bending in long slow arcs I didn't think trees that old were still capable of. Halden took it the way Halden takes everything — shutters closed at the right hour, lanterns lit at the right window, not a single loose thing left in a single yard, as though the whole town had rehearsed this exact storm the week before and simply forgotten to mention it to me.

I went to Adela's, because I couldn't make myself sit alone in the cottage listening to the wind find every gap in it. The walk there was longer than it should have been, the rain coming sideways off the millpond, a shutter torn loose somewhere ahead of me banging against a wall in the dark like something trying to get out. She opened the door before I'd finished knocking, already dressed, already moving, as if she too had known the precise minute I'd arrive, which I told myself, standing dripping on her threshold, was simply what happens when two people who care for each other

learn each other's rhythms over a year — and which I could not, even telling myself that, make land the way it should have.

"You're shaking," she said, and pulled me in out of it.

"Everyone in this town is so calm," I said. "Everyone except me."

"Maybe you're the only one paying attention," she said, and there was something almost gentle in the way she said it, gentle and unbearably sad, like a woman handing someone a truth she'd already made her own peace with a long time before he'd arrived to need it. She held onto my arm through the worst of the wind, the two of us sitting on her floor with the shutters straining, and for the first time in a year I let myself stop performing calm for her sake and simply be as afraid as I actually was — and it was, I understood even as it was happening, the single most unscripted thing I had done since I'd come to Halden, my own fear, hers, plain and unimproved and entirely without an audience.

"If I asked you to come with me," I said, into the dark, not fully meaning to say it out loud, "past the edge of town. Just to see."

She didn't answer for a long time, long enough that I thought the wind might have simply carried the question somewhere neither of us could get it back from. "Ask me again," she said finally, "when the wind's died down enough that I can trust what either of us says in it."

We sat like that until the worst of it passed, her shoulder against mine, neither of us saying anything more, and I found, somewhere in that long quiet stretch of listening to the storm work itself out over the roof, that I had stopped being afraid of the wind at all, and started being afraid, instead, of the ordinary, undramatic morning I knew was waiting on the other side of it.

## **TWENTY-TWO**

### *TOWN*

I went alone, near dawn, while the worst of it was still breaking.

The road out past the millpond runs to a stand of trees the town has always simply called the tree line, and I had walked it a hundred

times without once wondering what was actually past it, the way you don't wonder what's past the edge of a photograph you've looked at your whole life. The millpond itself was running high and brown with runoff, branches and torn leaves spinning slowly in the current where the water usually sat still enough to hold a reflection. This morning I walked past it wanting, for the first time since I'd come to Halden, to know.

The wind was still strong enough to lean into. I stood at the last house, the last lamppost, the last fence Halden had ever bothered to build, and looked down the road toward whatever the tree line was actually hiding. The trees themselves gave nothing away — just trees, dark and close-set and entirely ordinary, no gate, no wall, no sign of the kind of boundary a place like this ought to have if it had one at all. And found that I could not, in that moment, make my legs carry me the last stretch of it — not from fear of the storm, which was already easing, but from something closer to the vertigo of standing at the edge of a life I had spent a year deciding, without quite admitting it to myself, that I might not survive stepping out of.

Farrow was there. Not surprised to see me, not blocking the road, simply standing a little further along it than I was, hands in his coat, watching the same tree line I was watching.

"You don't have to stop here," he said. "I've never once told you that you did."

"You've never once told me anything at all," I said.

"That's not quite true," he said, "but I understand why it feels that way." He looked at me for a long moment, and whatever was in his face then, I couldn't call it cruelty and couldn't quite call it kindness either. "Whatever's past that line, Teo, it's still going to be your life on the other side of it, once you've had it a week. That's true whether I built the line or the wind did. I'd think about that, before you spend what's left of the storm proving a point to no one but yourself."

I stood there until the wind dropped enough to hear the birds start again, one and then a scattering of others, the ordinary morning

noise of Halden reassembling itself around me as though nothing at all had happened in the night, and then I turned around and walked back toward the hives, and I have never, to this day, been entirely sure whether that was the bravest thing I did all year or the last and quietest surrender.

## TWENTY-THREE

*APIARY LOG — Asha, first morning after*

The hive is fine. Better than fine — settled, calm, foraging again before I'd even finished my coffee, as though the whole storm had simply been weather to them, which I suppose, in the end, is all it ever actually was. The rise was scattered with broken branches, a few shingles down off the cottage roof, the whole town below looking faintly rearranged in the way a room looks after furniture has been moved back to nearly, but not quite, where it started.

I sat with Asha a long while this morning, the way I did on the very first day I wrote in this log, watching her entrance traffic steady and unhurried, no fanning at the board, no piping in the grass. It occurred to me, watching her, that she would go on exactly like this whether I ever worked out a single one of this year's questions or not — whether I was who I believed myself to be, or something built and placed here for reasons I'll never see the shape of, or, worse and stranger than either, something in between that doesn't have a clean word yet. She doesn't need my history to keep her comb warm. She doesn't need it to raise brood, or forage, or fly a straight line home. Whatever I turn out to be, the hexagons will still be hexagons, built by heat and circles and nothing else, needing no one's permission and no one's memory to keep coming out exactly right. I found, watching her work the frame nearest me, that I envied her the way I'd envied the foragers that very first morning, before any of this had a name — not because she has answers I lack, but because the question has simply never once occurred to her to ask, and there is a peace in that I don't think I'll ever be built to share, whatever I turn out to be made of.

I don't know if that's the saddest thing I've learned this year or the only genuinely comforting one. I've stopped expecting those two

feelings to arrive separately. I closed the log for the morning and sat a while longer on the overturned crate I keep by the hives for exactly this purpose, watching the light climb the far side of the rise, and let myself, for once, simply be a man sitting in the sun with nowhere he had to be, which is not nothing, whatever else turns out to be true.

## **TWENTY-FOUR**

### *TOWN*

The bees were already up before I was, which was as it should be.

I stood at the kitchen window with my coffee going cold in my hand, watching the first foragers lift off the landing boards in ones and twos, and the bakery smell reached the porch by quarter past, exactly, the way it always has, and the bandstand across the square looked, in the early light, freshly painted, though I couldn't have told you when anyone had last held a brush to it.

There is a particular quality to a morning like this one, when you have spent a night not sleeping so much as lying still and waiting for the night to end, and I have learned this year to recognize it without needing to check a clock — a thinness to the light, a kind of held-breath quiet in the house itself, as though the walls too were waiting to see which version of the day was going to arrive through the door.

I walked up to the hives while the grass was still wet enough to darken my boots, the smoker cold and swinging at my side, not yet needed, the same as it always is. Asha's entrance traffic was steady and unhurried. No fanning at the board. No piping in the grass. An ordinary Tuesday, the kind I have gone back to, all year, looking for the seam, and never once found.

On my way down I passed a woman I didn't recognize, tending a small stall of cut flowers near the fountain where Adela's has always stood, arranging a bucket of the same late tulips Adela had been sorting the evening I first noticed the trail move, her hands moving with the same unthinking economy, and she looked up as I passed and said, without my having asked her anything at all, that

she had a fresh bundle of the small white ones, the kind I never remember the name of, if I wanted them.

I bought them. I didn't ask where Adela had gone, or whether she had gone anywhere at all, or whether the question even meant what I would have meant by it a year ago. I carried the flowers home past the old stone wall, where a line of ants ran straight and certain toward wherever it is a good trail always eventually leads, and I did not stop to watch them go.

I don't know, writing this down, whether I am the man who walked out past the tree line that morning, or the one who turned back before he reached it. I have stopped being entirely sure the difference would show, from wherever it is a life like mine gets looked at, if there is anywhere at all. What I know is smaller than that, and, on the mornings it's enough, it still is: the bees were up before me, which was as it should be, and I went up the rise to see them anyway, the way I have every morning I can remember, and several, I am fairly sure, that I cannot.

## GLOSSARY

**Asha** [UH-shuh] — Avestan, *truth, right order*. In Zoroastrian thought, the principle by which the world is correctly ordered — order that is discovered and upheld rather than imposed. It is the name Teo gives, in a ledger only he reads, to the one hive of the four he names at all.

**Brood cycle** [brood SY-kul] — The development of a worker bee from egg to emergence: about twenty-one days — three as an egg, six as a larva, twelve capped in the cell. It is the unit Teo dates his apiary log in, in a town whose own calendar he has stopped trusting.

**Mill** [mil] — Short for ant mill. A column of army ants that has lost the raid trail and begun following one another instead, each laying its own scent over the scent of the ant ahead, until the column closes into a circle it cannot leave and runs until it dies. Army ants are effectively blind and navigate by trail alone, which is why nothing in the circle can see that it is one. Described by William Beebe in 1921 and analysed by T. C. Schneirla in 1944, whose own term for it is circular milling.

Teo keeps four hives on the rise above Halden, a town he was sent to a year ago for what the Trust calls restorative work. He cannot remember why.

It begins with a borrowed dish of slime mold that starts reaching toward its feeding hour before the hour arrives. Then ants whose trail has moved overnight. Then a ring of them out past the millpond, dozens deep, running in perfect order around a bare patch of dirt, going nowhere at all.

The bakery smell reaches his porch at quarter past six, exactly, every morning. The bandstand is repainted every spring though nobody has ever played there. His doctor comes on Thursdays, and has never once said no to a question, or once answered one.

What Teo assembles, log entry by log entry, is a case that his whole life was arranged for him — and, drawn from the same bees, a counter-case that some things cannot be arranged in advance by anyone, however much time they had to try.

*Not everything that lines up is a design.*

