

ROYA  
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No. 59



# THE BELL

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

# **THE BELL**

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 59

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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This book contains graphic depictions of violence, injury, bereavement, and self-destructive behaviour. It is not a manual and it is not an endorsement. It is intended for adult readers.

# THE VISIT

*nine seconds on the floor of a VFW hall in Cicero, Illinois*



## EIGHT

- |       |                                                                                           |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| one   | four minutes. Warm. Complete. She turned around.<br>The keys. The tongue in the cheek.    |
| two   | four minutes. Warm. Same.                                                                 |
| three | three minutes. Same.                                                                      |
| four  | anyway.                                                                                   |
| five  | two and a half. She didn't turn around. I got the back of her.                            |
| six   | the light was wrong. The kitchen had dimensions.<br>The keys, not my keys. Forty seconds. |
| seven | she said it twice. Then she said the hook line twice. Twenty seconds.                     |
| eight | four minutes forty. Complete. The best one. The flowers. The laugh.                       |

Not remembered. Present. There is a flat clinical name for it in the literature, and the literature also says this: there is no file. A memory is not kept whole and taken down to be looked at. It is built from parts, fresh, every time, in the conditions of the moment — and what goes back into storage is not what was taken out. It is what was just made. He assembled her eight times, in a concussed brain, in the minutes after severe rotational trauma. Ten fights. Eight visits. He had thought of it as eight visits, and the neurologist said eight times, and it was the same number and it was not the same number at all.

## SYNOPSIS

Sean Vardy is forty-four years old, four years widowed, and fighting on the unlicensed circuit in banquet halls and truck bays on the industrial edge of Chicago.

After a knockdown in a VFW hall in Cicero, he experiences four minutes that the medical literature has a flat clinical name for and that he calls, privately, a visit. His wife is in the room. Not remembered. Present. Breathing. Saying his name.

He starts taking fights to get it back.

The threshold rises. It always rises. What began as nine seconds and one punch becomes a barn in Will County, a scrap yard at four in the morning, and finally a room three hundred feet beneath the city where there are no rounds, no referee, and one bell to start and one bell when a man does not get up.

Sean knows the exchange rate. He has calculated it the way an addict calculates. What he does not know, until a neurologist explains it to him in an office overlooking a parking structure, is what the currency is.

A novella about grief, damage, the arithmetic of the addicted mind, and the particular cruelty of a memory that can only be looked at by being remade.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book started with a fact I could not put down.

There is no file. When you remember someone, you are not opening a drawer and looking at a photograph. You are building the person, that instant, out of parts kept in different rooms — and when you are finished, what goes back into storage is not what you took out. It is what you just made. Every act of remembering is an act of writing over.

This is not damage. It is the design. It is how anyone learns that the dog which bit them is dead now. But it means something that I have not been able to stop turning over, which is that the people we have lost are not preserved in us. They are in our custody, and custody has costs, and the more often we go in to look at them, the further they travel from whatever they actually were.

The other thing I could not put down is older and simpler. A body keeps a ledger. It keeps it whether or not the mind is willing to read it, and it keeps it accurately, and it does not care that the total is unpayable. There is a long tradition of people going looking for the truth in the body when the mind has stopped cooperating — through fasting, through cold, through distance, through pain. Sometimes they come back with something. That possibility interests me enormously and I have never once been able to persuade myself that it is safe.

So: a man who has lost his wife, and one door, and a price list.

I owe a debt in these pages to Vonnegut, who taught me that the most unbearable material in a life is best carried in the plainest possible voice and with a joke close to hand. Sean Vardy is profane and he is funny and he stays funny long past the point where the rest of him has come apart. That is not decoration. In my experience it is frequently the last faculty standing, and it is worth asking what it is doing down there, holding the lights on, after everything above it has gone dark.

I have tried to be accurate about the injuries. Not for the shock of it

— though there is shock in it — but because a man who is spending himself ought to be made to itemise the receipt.

Chew Z

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## **I. THE ROOM ABOVE THE BAR**

## 1. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

The banquet hall in Berwyn had a chandelier the size of a dishwasher and a carpet the color of a bad decision, and somebody had pushed the round tables against the wall to make room for the ring, which was not a ring. It was four rolls of blue gym mat duct-taped together and a rope run through eyebolts screwed into the drywall by a man who did not own a stud finder. The eyebolts were going to come out. Everybody in the room knew the eyebolts were going to come out. That was part of the ticket price.

I sat on a folding chair by the kitchen doors with my hands in my lap, unwrapped, because Denny wraps late. Denny has always wrapped late. Denny believes that a wrapped hand starts to swell inside the wrap the second you finish, that you have about eleven minutes of a hand being a hand and then it becomes a sausage in a casing, and he is not wrong, and he has also never once wrapped a hand in under nine minutes in his life, so the whole philosophy is a beautiful piece of horseshit he built to explain why he is slow.

"Look at me," he said.

"I'm looking at you."

"You're looking at the fucking floor."

"The floor's better looking than you, Denny. The floor's got a lot going on."

He got down on one knee in front of the chair, which at sixty-something and with that hip is a whole production, an act of civil engineering, and he took my chin in his hand and turned my face toward the light. He wasn't checking my eyes. He was checking the brow. There's a scar over my left eye that runs about an inch and a quarter on the diagonal, and it has been opened nine times, and it will open again, because scar tissue is not skin. Skin stretches. Scar tissue is a repair, and a repair has no give in it, and when the fist comes it doesn't stretch, it splits, along the old line, every single time, like a shirt that's been sewn shut over a wound.

"You get cut, you tell me," he said.

"I get cut, you'll fucking see it, it's on my face."

"You get cut and I'm not there, you sit down. You don't get up until I'm there."

"Okay."

"Say it."

"I'll sit on the floor in a banquet hall in Berwyn and wait for a sixty-four-year-old man to walk across the room. That's my whole plan for the evening, Denny. That's the strategy."

He didn't laugh. He hasn't laughed at anything I've said since the funeral, and I keep saying things anyway, which is either loyalty or a nervous condition, hard to say. He started on the left hand. Gauze, two turns at the wrist, thumb loop, the whole liturgy.

There were maybe ninety people in that room. Guys in good jackets who'd come out from the city because somebody at work told them about it and it sounded like a story they could tell. Guys in bad jackets who came every time. A few women, mostly attached to the jackets. Two kids who couldn't have been nineteen, standing right up at the rope, holding phones they had been told to put away and had not put away, and they were going to film it, and it was going to go nowhere, and in eleven years one of them would find it on an old drive and not be able to remember whose party it was.

I was forty-four years old. I had a professional record of nineteen and four and one and a detached retina that ended it, and a house in Hegewisch with a mortgage on it and a wife in the ground four years, and I was about to fight a thirty-one-year-old bricklayer named Marcus Wiley for eight hundred dollars in cash in a room that smelled like Sterno and carpet shampoo.

I want to be honest about this part, because the rest of it gets less honest as it goes, and I'd like there to be at least one thing in here you can stand on.

That night, I wasn't looking for anything. I hadn't found it yet. I didn't know it was there to be found. That night I just needed eight hundred dollars and I needed to be somewhere that wasn't the house, and those are the two most ordinary reasons a man has ever done anything, and if you're waiting for me to tell you I walked in there with a plan, I didn't.

I walked in there empty. Which, it turns out, is how you carry something out.

## 2. EIGHT HUNDRED DOLLARS

Wiley came out fast because thirty-one-year-olds come out fast. That's not a criticism. At thirty-one your body still returns your calls.

**Round one.** He threw a jab at my chest, which is what men do when they've been taught by YouTube and one summer at a gym in Cicero — they aim at the middle of you because the middle of you is the biggest part and it feels like the safe bet. I let it land. It felt like being shoved by a door. Then he threw the right hand and I wasn't there for it, and the beautiful thing about being forty-four with nineteen wins is that I don't have to be fast anymore, I only have to be early, and early is a thing you can still do when fast is gone. I put a jab into his mouth. Not hard. A tap. Just to introduce myself, just to let him know there was a person in here with him and not a heavy bag with a face drawn on it.

He blinked. That's the moment. Everything after the first honest punch is negotiation.

**Round two.** He got his weight into a left hook that caught me high on the temple and the room went briefly two-dimensional, like a photograph of a room, and then it came back. That's normal. That's a Tuesday. I stepped in and put a right hand under his elbow into the floating ribs, that soft ugly place where the ribs stop being a cage and start being a suggestion, and he made a noise like a man sitting down in a hot bath.

Body shots don't look like anything. That's why nobody claps. Ninety people paid to see a face come apart and the entire actual craft of this thing is happening a foot below where they're looking. You break a man's ribs and the crowd checks their phone.

He held me. His forearm came up under my chin and mashed my mouthguard sideways into my cheek and I felt the inside of my mouth open up on the molars, that clean bright little tear, and the blood came in and I swallowed it, because you swallow it, because

if you spit it the referee looks at you, and the referee that night was a guy named Vito who owned two Subways.

**Round three.** He was tired. Tired makes people brave in the worst way — they stop stepping and start swinging, because swinging feels like doing something and stepping feels like waiting. He swung. I slipped it by two inches and came over the top with the right hand and hit him flush on the button, the shelf of the jaw right at the end, the place where the whole architecture of a man is held together by one hinge on each side.

Here is what happens. The punch doesn't hurt him. That's the thing nobody understands. The punch rotates his head, and his head rotates faster than the thing inside it, and the thing inside it is not bolted down, it's floating in a bath of fluid inside a box of bone, and it keeps going after the box stops, and it hits the inside wall of the box, and then it comes back and hits the other wall. Two impacts. One punch. Every time.

He went down on his side with his eyes open. That's the worst kind and it's the kind the crowd loves best, because the eyes are open and the lights are on and there's nobody home, and for about four seconds a man is a house with the front door swinging.

They counted him out. Somebody's cousin poured water on his neck. He came back up through it slowly, the way they do, hand on the mat, face doing that confused thing, that terrible mild look of a man in a hallway trying to remember which apartment.

Vito lifted my arm. The two kids filmed it. One of the eyebolts came out of the drywall and nobody noticed.

Denny got a swab of adrenaline into the split on my brow — it had opened in the second, along the old line, obviously, hello again — and pressed it with two fingers and said nothing, and I sat on the folding chair and looked at Wiley across the room, sitting on his own folding chair, having water poured into him by a woman in a green dress.

"He's fine," Denny said.

"I know he's fine."

"You're looking at him like he's not fine."

"I'm looking at him," I said, "because he's got a nicer chair."

I got eight hundred dollars in an envelope from a man in a Blackhawks jacket and drove home with my hands throbbing in time with the turn signal and my mouth full of the taste of a penny, and I did not think about my wife once that entire night, and I want that in the record, because it's the last time it was ever true.

### 3. THE WEEK AFTER

Here's what the week after looks like, since nobody films that part.

**Day one.** You wake up and you can't open the left eye. Not swollen shut — that's day two. Day one it's glued. There's blood dried in the lashes and lymph fluid dried on top of the blood and the whole apparatus has set overnight like a cheap epoxy. You do not pull it. Men pull it. Men pull it and take the lashes and half the eyelid margin with them and then they've got a cut on an eyelid, which is a cut on the thinnest skin on the human body, and now they've got a real problem. What you do is you get a washcloth as hot as the tap goes, and you hold it on the whole side of your face for four minutes by the clock, and you let it dissolve, and then the eye comes open on its own and you look at yourself in a bathroom mirror at six in the morning and there is a stranger there with a purple bag under one eye like he's smuggling a plum.

**Day one, continued.** You piss and it's brown. Not red — brown, like weak tea, like the bottom of a coffee pot. That's muscle. That's the body dissolving whatever got hit hard enough to die and flushing it out through the kidneys, and if it's dark for more than two days you're supposed to go to a hospital, and no one goes to a hospital, and the kidneys sort it out or they don't.

**Day two.** The face has now committed. Everything that was going to swell has swelled. Under the eye is a shade of purple I have never seen anywhere else in the natural world — there's a green in it, and a kind of yellow-brown at the edge like a coffee ring — and the whole cheek has a shine, and when you press it with a finger, which you will, because you always do, the finger goes in and stays

for a second before the flesh comes back. That's the tissue full of fluid. Denny calls that the pudding stage.

The hands are worse than the face and this is always true and nobody believes it. The face is one bone in one place. The hands are twenty-seven bones each, and every single one of them has just been used as a hammer by an animal that did not design them for that. The knuckles are split — not cut, split, the skin has burst outward from the pressure underneath — and the third and fourth are the size of grapes, and there's a deep ache down in the wrist where the shock went, and in the morning you cannot make a fist and you cannot hold a coffee cup and you drink out of the cup with two hands like a toddler, standing at your own kitchen counter, forty-four years old.

**Day three.** The bruise starts migrating. This is the part that gets everybody. Blood has weight. It obeys gravity like everything else, so it drains downward through the soft tissue overnight, and the bruise that was under your eye on Tuesday is along your jawline on Thursday and in your neck by Saturday, and you look worse on day six than you did on day two, which means every person who sees you assumes it just happened, and you have to keep saying *no, this is the old one, this is fine, this is the healing*, and they nod and look at your shoes.

**Day four.** Somebody at the Jewel on Torrence asks if you're okay. She's about sixty and she's got that look, that specific expression, and I know exactly what she's seeing because I've seen it — she thinks somebody did this to me. She's got a whole story running. And I say I'm a boxer, and she says *oh, thank God*, and then she hears herself say it and we both stand there in the produce section holding that sentence between us like a dropped plate.

**Day six.** The brow is knitting. You can feel it doing it. There's an itch under the scab that isn't on the skin, it's under the skin, in the meat, and it is the single most maddening sensation available to a human being. Denny used to say scratch a healing cut and you'll open it and then it'll heal wider, and a wider scar splits easier next time, and that's how a man's face turns into a road map over twenty years. One good scar. Nine bad reopenings.

**Day nine.** You look almost normal. There's a yellow ghost under the eye. The knuckles have scabbed over black. You can make a fist again. You've slept maybe four hours a night the whole week because a bruised face has no comfortable side, and the tiredness has gotten down into the parts of you that talk, and everything you say for a week comes out flat and mean, and there's nobody in the house to say it to.

That's the week. That's what eight hundred dollars costs, arithmetic-wise.

The thing is, I'd have done it for nothing. That's not tough-guy talk. Look at the numbers. Ninety people, eight hundred bucks, four hours round trip, a face I couldn't take to a job interview for two weeks. Nobody does that for money. Anybody telling you they do it for money is telling you the first thing they thought of.

You do it because for eleven minutes on a Saturday nothing in your head is talking.

That's it. That's the whole product.

#### **4. A MAN WHO KNOWS A FACE**

Denny Fewster owned a two-flat in South Deering with a garage he'd turned into a gym in 1994, and by *gym* I mean a heavy bag, a speed bag platform he'd built out of a cabinet door, a mirror from a dead motel, and a space heater that had been recalled.

I went over on the Sunday because he'd have come to me otherwise and I didn't want him in the house.

"Jesus," he said, when he opened the door. "You look like a thumb."

"Thanks."

"No, but with a face drawn on it."

"Thank you, Denny."

He made coffee in a machine older than my career and we sat on two folding chairs in the garage with the heater ticking and I let him look at the brow, and he took the butterflies off and looked underneath and put new ones on, and he did it with the pad of his thumb, very lightly, and it occurred to me — not for the first time —

that Denny Fewster had touched my face more gently over thirty years than any man had ever touched anything of mine.

"Gaz called me," he said.

"Gaz calls everybody."

"He's got a card at the VFW in Cicero the second week of December. Eight hundred, gloved, three by three." He turned the mug around in his hands. "And then he did the other thing he does."

"What's the other thing he does."

"He talked about bare."

Gaz Tunney was not a gangster and I want to be clear about that, because it would be a great comfort to me now if he had been. Gaz was five foot six and wore a quarter-zip and had a phone in each hand and a spreadsheet with tabs, and he had never in his life made a man do anything. That's the whole problem with Gaz. He was a *facilitator*. You told Gaz what you wanted and Gaz went and got it, promptly, at a fair price, with a text message confirming, and if what you wanted was to be beaten to death in stages then Gaz would find you a room and forty guys to watch and he would not think about it once, not because he was cruel, but because he was in *logistics*.

"I'm not doing bare," I said.

"Good."

"I'm forty-four years old, Denny. My hands are the last thing I've got that works."

Which was true, and which was also, I understand now, the exact sound a man makes standing at the edge of a thing and describing the edge in detail so he doesn't have to describe the thing.

Because let me tell you what bare actually is, since everybody gets it wrong. People hear *bare-knuckle* and they think: more savage. And it is, but not the way they think. The glove was never there to protect the man getting hit. It's there to protect the *fist*. Take the padding off and your hand becomes the fragile part — the fifth metacarpal, the long bone behind your little finger, goes at a

fraction of the force a grown man can put through it — so you can't throw everything you've got at somebody's skull without paying for it.

Which sounds like mercy.

It isn't. What actually happens is the fights go longer. Nobody gets stopped clean, so you both stand there absorbing, and absorbing, for minutes, for tens of minutes, and the number of times your head gets accelerated and stopped goes *up*. Way up.

And it's the number that does it. Not the knockouts. The number.

I didn't know that yet. I want to be fair to myself for one paragraph and then I'll knock it off. On that Sunday, in Denny's garage, with the heater ticking and my face like a thumb, I did not know that. I knew bare was worse. I did not know *how* it was worse. There's a difference, and the difference is the only thing standing between me and being a man who did this on purpose from the start, and I'm going to hold onto it, because it's a thin fucking margin and it's all I've got.

"Say something," Denny said.

"Eight hundred."

"Sean."

"What."

"When Marge went," he said, and stopped, and started again, which he did, which was the only tell he had, "I painted the whole house. Inside and out. Took me five months. I painted rooms nobody'd been in since 1988. You understand what I'm telling you."

"You're telling me to paint the house."

"I'm telling you I know what a man does."

"Denny, if I painted that house I'd have to go in every room in it."

He didn't have anything for that. It's the only time I ever shut him up in thirty-four years and I'd give a lot to have it back, because after that he stopped saying it out loud and started just *looking* at me, and a man can argue with a sentence.

"Second week of December," he said. "I'll wrap you."

"You'll wrap me."

"I'll wrap you and I'll hold the fucking bucket and I'll tell you when you're loading the left, and that's the whole of my contribution to your life, apparently, so let me do it right."

## 5. NINE SECONDS

The VFW in Cicero had a drop ceiling with a brown stain shaped like Ohio and a bar with a sign on it that said CASH ONLY — DON'T ASK, and the ring was a real ring, borrowed, with real ropes, and there was a woman selling raffle tickets for a smoker.

The kid's name was Andriy Kovalenko and he was twenty-six and he did not know how to fight and he could hit like the door of a car.

Round one I outboxed him. Left hand in his face, forty-one times, a jab is not a punch it's a *ruler*, it measures the distance and tells the right hand where to go, and I stuck it in his eye socket until his eye socket was a color.

Round two I got greedy.

That's all it was. I want to make it sound like fate and it was greed. He dropped his right coming in and I saw the gap and I stepped in to put the left hook through it and I stepped in about four inches too far, and he threw a right hand blind, with his eyes half shut, not aiming at anything, the way a man swats at a wasp — and it landed on the hinge of my jaw.

There's a spot. Every fighter knows it and nobody explains it well, so here: the jaw is a lever, and it's hinged just under the ear, and if you hit the far end of that lever from the side, the head *rotates*. Not back. Around. And the brain, floating in its cup and a half of fluid, has to rotate too, except the outside of it starts rotating before the inside does, and all the long fibers running through it — the wiring, the millions of little cables that carry every single thing you are from one part of you to another — get twisted and stretched at once. Every one of them. Simultaneously.

The lights don't go out. That's television. What happens is the floor arrives.

I don't remember going down and I don't remember the count. Ruiz told me afterward that I got up at seven and that I looked at him and said *Nuala*, clearly, twice, and he waved it off, which was correct, and Denny came in and got me under the arms.

Here's what I do remember.

I remember I was on the canvas on my right side with my cheek on it and the canvas smelled like a mat, that dead rubbery smell, and about a foot from my face there was a cigarette burn in it from some other decade, and I was looking at the burn.

And then she was there.

I need to be careful here. This is the whole book. This is the thing I spent everything on, and if I fuck up the description of it then nothing after it makes any sense, so let me go slow.

She was not a picture. She was not a memory. I want to explain the difference and I don't think I can, but here it is: when you remember someone you are the one doing it. You're the projectionist. You're back in the booth running the reel and you know the whole time that you're in the booth. This was not that. There was no booth.

She was in the kitchen in Hegewisch, our kitchen, the one with the burner that clicks four times before it lights, and it was afternoon, and the light was coming in over the sink at the angle it comes in at around four o'clock in the fall, that low gold that gets into everything. She had her hair up in the elastic she kept on her wrist. She had the blue cardigan with the pilled elbows. She was standing at the counter doing something with her hands that I couldn't see and she turned partway around and she looked at me over her shoulder and she said, "Sean, did you move my keys?"

And I could smell her. That's the thing. That's the thing I could never make anybody understand afterward, and I stopped trying. I could smell her hair. There is no memory that has a smell in it. Memory is silent film with the smell burned off. This had *everything*.

I said something. I don't know what.

She said, "Because they're not on the hook," and she made the face, the one where she pushed her tongue into her cheek, the one she made at me nine thousand times over four years about the keys, the keys, the fucking keys, and I hadn't seen that face since the fourth of November 2017 and I would have given both my hands and my eyes and my name to see it and there it was, there she was, breathing, four feet away, alive in a kitchen.

It went on for about four minutes.

I know it was four minutes because Denny had me on the stool with an ice bag on my neck and he said afterward that I was gone for four minutes, sitting up, eyes open, not answering, and he was about ten seconds from calling an ambulance, and then I came back and looked at him and said, "Where'd she go?"

And Denny Fewster, who has known me since I was twelve, said: "Who?"

## **6. THEREFORE**

Nine seconds.

That's how long I was on the floor. Seven-count plus the getting up. Nine seconds by the clock on the wall of a VFW hall in Cicero, Illinois, and in those nine seconds I had four minutes with my wife, which is a rate of exchange that I would like somebody to sit down and explain to me, and nobody ever has, and I have asked a neurologist.

Nobody saw anything. That's what I keep coming back to. Forty guys and a woman with a raffle book and not one of them saw a single thing worth mentioning. A middle-aged guy got dropped and got up. That was the event, out here, in the room. In here it was the fourth of November and the light was coming in over the sink and she was alive.

I finished the fight. Won the third on Ruiz's card and lost the decision, which was right, and Kovalenko's people were happy, and there was a moment where the kid hugged me and said something about how he'd watched me on a card at the UIC Pavilion when he

was fourteen, and I said something back, and I have no idea what either of us said because I was not there.

I was doing arithmetic.

I sat in my truck in the lot of a VFW in Cicero for fifty minutes with the engine off in December and I did arithmetic, and this is the part where a normal man goes to a grief group and I went to a spreadsheet.

The facts as I had them:

One. It had never happened before. Four years, three hundred and something nights alone in that house, every photograph, every voicemail I couldn't delete, her coat still in the hall — nothing. Not once. Grief doesn't give you the person. That's the joke at the center of it that nobody warns you about. Grief gives you a *hole shaped like* the person, and you can walk around it and describe its edges in great detail for the rest of your life and you will never once get to see her face.

Two. It happened tonight.

Three. Tonight was different from every other night of the last four years in exactly one respect, and the respect was that a twenty-six-year-old from Ukrainian Village had rotated my head about forty degrees around its own axis at eight hundred pounds of force.

Four. Therefore.

I sat with the *therefore* for a long time. Long enough that the lot emptied out and a guy came and put a chain across the entrance and had to unlock it again to let me out, and gave me a look.

And I want to tell you that I was horrified. That I sat in that truck and understood what I was looking at and recoiled from it like a decent man.

I did not. I want to say that the thing I felt, sitting there with a jaw I couldn't fully close and blood in the pocket of my mouth, was closer to what a man feels when the tests come back and it isn't cancer. It was *relief*. Enormous, warm, obliterating relief. Because for four

years the situation had been: she is gone and there is no way to her.

And now the situation was: there's a way to her.

It's expensive. Fine. Everything's expensive.

I drove home on Cicero Avenue with the window down because the cold felt good on the eye, and I put the radio on and it was some jingle for a mattress place, and I laughed so hard I had to pull over, and I could not have told you what was funny. I still can't. I've thought about it a lot. I think what was funny was: four years of therapy referrals I never called, and a bereavement group at St. Kevin's with folding chairs and a percolator, and a book my sister sent me about *stages*, and it turns out the answer was a Ukrainian roofer's kid with a lazy right hand.

You do have to laugh. Or you don't, but then what have you got.

## **7. THE HONEST WAY**

I tried to get it for free first. I want that in the record too.

For twelve days I tried to get it the honest way, the way you're supposed to, the way the pamphlet says, and I am here to report that the honest way is a fraud and the pamphlet is a fraud and whoever wrote it never lost anybody.

I got the photographs down out of the closet. There are four hundred and eleven photographs of Nuala Deane on this earth and I have all of them and I laid them out on the dining table in rows like a man doing a jigsaw of somebody's face, and I sat there under the overhead with a beer going warm and I looked at each one for a long time.

Here's what a photograph is. A photograph is a picture of a picture. You don't remember her, you remember *the photo*, and after enough years the photo has eaten the memory, quietly, the way ivy eats a wall, and what you're left with is a woman standing at Montrose Beach in 2014 in a green jacket, permanently, at that one angle, forever, and you cannot rotate her, and she has no smell, and she does not turn around.

I played the voicemail. There's one. Eleven seconds. She's in a Jewel and she wants to know if we have paprika. That's the whole thing, that's the last recording of my wife's voice on this earth, the word *paprika*, and I have listened to it enough times that I have destroyed it — not the file, the file's fine, but the *listening*. It's a sound now. It's just a sound my phone makes.

I went in the closet. Her side. I stood in there with the door shut and my face in the shoulder of the wool coat with the toggles, the one she wore to her mother's funeral, and I breathed in as deep as a man can breathe.

Cedar block. Dry cleaning. Dust.

Four years is how long it takes. That's the number, if anybody wants it. Four years and the last of her is out of the wool.

And I sat on the floor of that closet, forty-four years old, with a face like a bag of plums, and I understood the shape of my situation with total clarity for the first time.

Everything I had left of her was *representation*. Photographs, recordings, objects, stories I'd told so many times they'd worn smooth like steps. All of it secondhand. All of it me, doing an impression.

Except for four minutes in a VFW hall in Cicero, where she had turned around and asked me about her keys, and I could smell her hair.

That wasn't a representation. That was *her*.

I don't care what anybody says about that. I know what everybody says about that. I have since had it said to me by a woman with two degrees, kindly, in a room with a window, and she was right, and I don't care.

There is a version of this where I'm crazy. I've considered it at length, it's a real option, and I want to say for the record that I checked. I know what year it is. I know who I am. I paid my taxes in April, badly, but so does everybody. I am not a man who sees things.

I'm a man who saw one thing. Once. Under a specific and reproducible set of conditions.

And on day twelve I put the four hundred and eleven photographs back in the box and I put the box back in the closet and I closed the door, and I picked up the phone, and I sat with it in my hand for a while, doing nothing, the way you sit with a phone when you already know what you're going to do with it and you'd like the record to show a period of reflection.

## **8. FOUR ROOMS AND A DRAWER**

Let me describe the house, because I've been talking around it for seven chapters and that's cowardice.

It's on Baltimore Avenue in Hegewisch, one and a half stories, aluminum siding the color of a Band-Aid, bought in 2013 with her money and my name, which was a whole argument for two years and then wasn't. There's a garage out back that leans. There's a hedge I have not cut since the fall of 2017 and it is now taller than the front window, and the neighbors have stopped mentioning it, which is worse than when they mentioned it.

Inside there are eleven rooms if you count the bathrooms and the landing.

I use four.

I use the kitchen, which is the hard one, and I use it because a man has to eat and there's nowhere else to do it. I use the front room, where the television is, and I sleep in there on the couch, most nights, all nights, four years of nights. I use the small bathroom. And I use the back hall where the washer is.

That's it. That's the whole map.

Upstairs I have not been in — I want to be accurate — I have been up nine or ten times, for the furnace filter and once when a pipe went. The bedroom door is shut. Her bathrobe is on the back of it. I could take the bathrobe off the door but then I'd be a man holding a bathrobe, and then what.

The second bedroom at the back is the one I don't go in at all. That one's not about her.

That one's Fionn's, and Fionn was eleven days old, and I'll get to it, and I'm not getting to it now.

So: four rooms, and a hedge, and a truck. Forty-four years old. Roofing work when Ostrowski calls, which is April to November and not always then. Six hundred to a thousand a night for the other thing. There's no cat. People kept trying to give me a cat.

And a drawer.

There's a drawer in the sideboard in the dining room, the middle one, and in it are the things that came back to me in a plastic bag from the Illinois State Police in November of 2017, and a manila envelope from the funeral home, and some paperwork, and one other item, and I have not opened that drawer since the week after, and I open it in chapter twenty, and when I open it there's something in it that doesn't make sense.

I'm telling you it's there because I'm not a fucking magician. I don't want any credit for surprising you later. It's a drawer in a sideboard in a dining room in Hegewisch and it has been sitting there the entire time, twelve feet from where I sleep, and I walk past it every day of my life, and there is a piece of paper in it, and everything that happens to me in this book happens because I did not open a drawer.

## **9. A GUY WITH A PHONE**

"Sean Vardy," said Gaz Tunney, on the second ring. "The man himself. How's the face."

"The face is fine."

"I heard you got dropped."

"I got dropped."

"Kovalenko's people are asking about a rematch, actually, if you want it, they'll do nine, they liked the crowd —"

"Denny said you talked about bare."

There was a pause on the line about a second and a half long and I want to be precise about that pause because I have thought about it since. It was not a pause of *reluctance*. Gaz Tunney was not sitting there with his conscience. It was the pause of a man opening a different tab.

"Bare," he said. "Yeah. Okay. Yeah, I can do bare."

"When."

"January's when it picks up. There's a thing on the twenty-second, back of the transfer yard off Torrence, that's a truck bay, it's indoors, it's heated, sort of, there's a guy sells beer out of a cooler. That's a grand."

"January's seven weeks."

"It's the twenty-second."

"That's seven weeks, Gaz."

Another pause. Different one.

"You in a hurry?"

And here is where I should have heard it. That's the sentence. If you want to find the exact place where I could have stepped off, that's it, that's the doorway, right there, a five-foot-six man in a quarter-zip with a phone in each hand asking me a perfectly reasonable administrative question.

*You in a hurry?*

"I could use the money," I said.

"Sure," said Gaz.

Neither of us believed it and neither of us cared, and that was the entire nature of my relationship with Gaz Tunney for the next nine months. He never once asked me why. He never once told me to stop. He never once did anything but exactly what I asked him to do, promptly, with a confirming text, and it is very important to me that everybody understands that Gaz Tunney did not do this to me.

I did this to me. I just needed a guy with a phone.

"There's a thing on the eighteenth of December," he said. "It's smaller. It's not really — look, it's a barn out past Beecher, it's a farm thing, it's forty guys and a generator. It's six hundred. It's bare."

"Book it."

"Sean, it's four days after you got knocked out."

"Book it, Gaz."

"Okay," said Gaz Tunney, and I heard him typing. "Booked."

I hung up and I stood in my kitchen in Hegewisch with the phone in my hand and the burner clicking four times before it lit, and I put the pan on, and I made two eggs, and I felt — and I'd like to be honest to the end here, because it's the only thing I've got left that's worth anything — I felt *good*.

I felt like a man who's found a doctor who'll write the script.

## **II. THE LEDGER**

## 10. NINETEEN DEGREES

A pole barn nine miles past Beecher with a dirt floor and a diesel generator running two work lamps on stands, and it was nineteen degrees outside and about twenty-six inside, and you could see everybody's breath, forty of them, standing in a ring three deep, and the breath hung up in the rafters in a layer like weather.

No ropes. The ring was the men. That's it. That's what a bare fight is in a barn — the crowd is the ropes, and if you go back into them they push you forward, and they push *hard*, because they're drunk and it's their turn to be part of it.

No rounds. A count. When a man goes down the ref counts to twenty and if you're up you go again, and there is no minute on a stool, there is no corner, there is no water unless somebody hands it to you between counts. It goes until it stops.

The man's name was Errol Boyce and he was thirty-eight and he was a scaffolder out of Chicago Heights and he was the first genuinely dangerous person I fought in this whole run, and I have thought about him kindly ever since.

Let me tell you about hitting a man in the face with a bare hand.

The face is not soft. Everybody thinks the face is soft. The face is a *bucket of bone* with about four millimeters of skin over it, and the parts of it that stick out — the brow ridge, the cheekbone, the point of the chin, the top of the skull — are the hardest bone in the human body, harder than your femur, per square inch. Your hand is twenty-seven bones the size of pencils held together with string.

You hit a skull with a bare fist and one of two things happens. If you get it right, you land on the jaw or the temple with the two big knuckles, the index and the middle, driving straight through the wrist, and the force goes into the man and not into you. If you get it wrong — if you land a half-inch out, on the little-finger side, or you land on the top of his head because he's ducked — then the fifth metacarpal, the long thin bone behind your pinkie, snaps.

It doesn't hurt when it goes either. It just makes a noise you feel in your teeth, and afterward the knuckle is *gone*, there's a dent where

a knuckle used to be, and the hand still works, mostly, in the way that a chair with three legs is still a chair if you're careful.

I broke mine ninety seconds in.

I'd like to say I fought on out of courage. I fought on because the alternative was to go home to Baltimore Avenue on the eighteenth of December with a broken hand and nothing else.

So I fought with one hand for — I want to say twenty minutes and Denny says it was closer to thirty-five. I fought it on the back foot and I fought it with my forearms up in front of my face like a man carrying a stack of plates and I let Errol Boyce hit those forearms until my forearms didn't work either, and then I let him hit my head, because that's what was left.

Here's what he did to my face over the course of half an hour.

He closed the left eye first, which is a mercy, since the right one was still healing and now both sides of my head were rumor and I could stop worrying about seeing.

He split the left eyebrow, new cut, virgin skin, and a new cut in fresh skin bleeds worse than an old one — the old ones are half scar and scar has fewer vessels in it. So the blood came down that side in a sheet.

He broke my nose. That's the fourth time. When it goes you hear it inside your own head, a crunch like somebody stepping on a snail, and then instantly you can't breathe through it and the tears come — not crying, it's a plumbing thing, the nose and the eyes are connected and when the nose fills the eyes water — and you are now a man with two blind eyes and no air.

And somewhere in there he got me on the cheekbone with a straight right and I felt the *zygomatic arch*, which is the bone bridge you can feel running from just below your eye back to your ear — put two fingers on your own face and you're touching it now — I felt it *give*. Not break through. Depress, and come back. Like the roof of a car.

Somewhere around minute twenty-five I stopped being able to hold a thought in my head for longer than about a second and a half.

That's the honest description. Not *dizzy*. Not *dazed*. There was simply no place to put anything. You'd start a sentence in your own mind and by the middle of it the beginning was gone, and the sentence would just stand there like a man who's walked into a room and forgotten why.

And that's when it came.

She was in the kitchen. Same light, that four-o'clock gold over the sink. She had the cardigan on and her hair in the elastic and she was doing something with her hands at the counter and she turned around and she said:

"Sean, did you move my keys?"

And I could smell her.

It was warm and it was complete and it went on for a long time, and out in the barn, according to Denny, I was on my knees in the dirt with my hands down and Errol Boyce was standing over me, and Errol Boyce — and this is why I've thought about him kindly ever since — Errol Boyce would not hit me. He stood there. He looked at the men and he said, out loud, to a barn full of drunks in Will County, "He's done, he's *done*, somebody get him."

Nobody got me. They counted to twenty.

She said, "Because they're not on the hook."

She pushed her tongue into her cheek.

Two men picked me up under the arms and walked me out to Denny's Buick through the cold with my feet dragging tracks in the gravel, and I was smiling, apparently, with a face that had approximately no structural relationship to a face, and Denny Fewster said the only thing he said the whole way back to Hegewisch, which was:

"That's it, then."

And I said, "That's what?"

And he said, "Nothing. That's nothing."

## 11. THE LONG VERSION

All right. Since we're going to be here a while, and since a man who won't tell you where he came from is usually hiding something dumber than a crime.

My father was Emmett Vardy and he worked at Wisconsin Steel on the East Side, in the eighty-inch mill, from 1961 until a quarter past three in the afternoon on the twenty-eighth of March, 1980, at which time a man came out onto the floor and told three thousand men to go home.

Not laid off. *Closed*. That afternoon. There was no notice and there were no severance checks and the paychecks they'd already handed out that week bounced, all of them, at every currency exchange from Torrence to Ewing, because the company had gone under between the printing and the cashing. Men stood in line at the Commercial Avenue exchange with paper in their hands that was worth exactly nothing, and the guy behind the glass had to say it three thousand times.

My father was forty-one. I was three.

He got another job. I want to be fair to him. He got two. He drove for a linen service and he did nights at a warehouse in Riverdale, and he did that for about six years, and somewhere in the middle of those six years the actual Emmett Vardy left and did not tell anybody, and what was left came home and sat in the brown chair.

That's the whole of my childhood, if you want it in one image. A man in a brown chair in a front room on Baltimore Avenue with the television on and the sound down, and a boy on the floor, and neither of them saying anything, for years. He wasn't violent. I want to be clear, because everybody's waiting for that and it would be tidier. He never hit me once in his life. He just went *out*, like a pilot light, and stayed out, and the house got cold in a way that had nothing to do with the furnace.

My mother's name was Deirdre and she cleaned at the Hegewisch branch library and at two doctors' offices, and she is the only person in this story who did everything right and got nothing for it.

She died in 2009 of something in her pancreas, quickly, which I understand is the good version.

In 1988 I was twelve and a kid named Ruben Salas told me there was a gym over on 106th where they let you in free, and I went, and it wasn't free, it was three dollars a month, and Denny Fewster paid it for me for four years and never once mentioned it, and I only found out in 2003 from somebody else.

Here's why I stayed. Not the boxing. The building was warm.

That's it. That's the truth. The Ironbound gym on 106th had a boiler that worked and my house had a man in a chair, and I would have gone there to learn accounting.

But then there's the other thing, which took longer to notice.

In a fight, there is nothing else. There's no room in it. Whatever you are carrying — and I was twelve and I was already carrying, everybody's carrying by twelve — you cannot carry it and slip a jab at the same time. The head empties. It's the only place I have ever found where the head empties.

I want you to hold onto that, because it comes back in about a hundred pages and it's going to cost me my life.

Pro at twenty-five, which is late. Nineteen and four and one over nine years. I was never going to be anything and I knew it by the fourth fight, and I stayed anyway, because what else, and because for a few years there it paid better than the roof.

Twenty-thirteen: I fought a card at a casino in Elgin and afterward, in the lobby, a woman with a hospital badge still clipped to her bag looked at my face and said, "You know you're going to have to do something about that eye." Nuala Deane, thirty-four, a respiratory therapist at Christ, from Beverly, six brothers, a mouth on her like a dropped tray of cutlery. We were married in nine months.

I want to say something about her now, before everything, and I want you to remember I said it.

She was funny. Not funny for a woman, not funny for a nurse. Funny. She could do the whole of my family in voices. She once described my father's chair as "the only piece of furniture in Illinois

with a hostage.” She said things at funerals that made people run outside. When I say I miss her I am not talking about a soft warm presence in a kitchen. I am talking about a specific, mean, extremely fast intelligence that could take the roof off a room, and if you take nothing else from all this, take that, because a long way further on I’m going to show you a version of her that’s soft and warm and vague in a kitchen and I need you to already suspect it.

Twenty-fifteen: the retina had already gone in 2010 — a fight in Hammond, a thumb, and then a month later a curtain coming down over the bottom of my vision like somebody drawing a blind, and a surgeon at Christ with a laser, and *you’re done*.

And then in March of 2015 we had a son.

Fionn Emmett Vardy. Eight pounds one ounce. Born on a Wednesday at Christ, in the same building she worked in, delivered by people she’d eaten lunch with for twelve years, and he was perfect, and I held him and he had a hand like a little wet leaf.

He got sick on day seven. It was a bacteria that lives in about a quarter of all women, that does nothing to them, that is completely harmless right up until it isn’t, and it went into his blood and from his blood into the lining around his brain, and they gave him everything they had, in the building where his mother worked, with everyone she knew standing over him.

He died on the twenty-second of March, 2015, at eleven days old, at four in the morning, and I want to say one thing about it and then I’m going to close this door.

I did not cry.

Not at the hospital, not at the funeral home, not at the little grave at Holy Cross that costs less than a car. I stood next to my wife, who was making a sound I had never heard a human being make, and I put my hand on her back, and I felt absolutely nothing at all, and I have never told anybody that, and I want it written down.

I don’t think I ever came back on. I think I went out like my father, in a chair, and it took eighteen months for anybody to notice.

That's what killed the marriage, by the way. Not Fionn. Fionn is what happened to us. What killed the marriage is what I did afterward, which was nothing, for three years, in a front room, with the sound down.

And then on the fourth of November 2017 my wife died on the Bishop Ford in the rain, at 11:53 at night, in a car, alone.

That's the long version. Or that's the version I had, on the eighteenth of December, driving home from a barn past Beecher with a hand in four pieces.

I want you to notice I got all the way through it without mentioning why she was on the expressway at that hour.

I got through it that way for four years. I got very good at it. I could tell you my whole life in ten minutes and go right past the hole in the middle of it like a man walking around a manhole he's stopped seeing.

## **12. ELEVEN DAYS**

I said I was closing that door and then I drove home from Beecher with a hand in four pieces and couldn't sleep for it, so we're going to open it, and I'll be quick, and I'd appreciate it if nobody was kind to me about it afterward.

**Day one.** The eleventh of March, 2015. Eight pounds one ounce. Christ, fourth floor, the building his mother had worked in for twelve years, delivered by a woman named Jolene who had eaten lunch with Nuala twice a week since 2006 and who cried handing him over, in the good way.

He had black hair, a lot of it, standing straight up like he'd had a fright. He had a hand like a little wet leaf and when I put my finger in it, it shut.

I'd like to say what that did to me and I can't, and that's not modesty, it's an engineering failure. There's no part on me for it.

**Day two.** Home. Baltimore Avenue. The car seat took me thirty-five minutes and I have built roofs.

**Days three, four, five, six.** Nothing. That's the whole entry and it's the best one. Four days of nothing. He fed, he slept, he made a noise like a small door, Nuala's sisters came in shifts and filled the freezer, and I sat up at three in the morning with him on my chest in the front room with the television on and the sound down — that room, that chair, I want you to notice — and it is the only time in my life the chair was a good place to be.

**Day seven.** He wouldn't feed.

That's the whole warning you get. There's usually no fever with one that small; it often goes the other way, they go *cold*, and the signs are that he isn't feeding, he's floppy, he isn't making the noise.

Nuala had him in her arms at twenty past eight in the morning and she said, in a voice I had never heard out of her, flat and low and completely calm: "Sean. Get the keys."

She knew. She'd been doing that job for twelve years. She knew in the kitchen at twenty past eight, holding him, and she did not say one word about it in the car.

**What it was.**

There's a bacteria called group B strep. About one woman in four carries it, all the time, in the ordinary course of being a person. It does nothing. It has no symptoms. It is not a disease, it is not anybody's fault, and it does not mean one thing about anybody.

They test for it late in a pregnancy, around eight months, and if you're positive they run antibiotics through you during the delivery and that handles it, nearly always. Nuala tested negative. Negative on paper in January and carrying it in March, because it comes and goes, because the test is a photograph of one afternoon.

It got into him on the way out, through the ordinary business of being born. It sat there six days doing nothing.

Then it went into his blood, and out of his blood into the lining around his brain — a thin wrapper of tissue over it, like the skin inside an eggshell — and once it's in there the lining swells, and there is nowhere in a skull for a swelling to go.

That's it. That's the entire mechanism. That is what killed my son: pressure in a box.

**Days seven to ten.** The unit.

Everything in there is beige and there is no time. No windows in the room he was in. There's a clock, and you stop being able to read it as a clock; it becomes a thing on a wall with hands.

He was in a plastic box on a shelf with a lid, warmed, with portholes in the side you put your arms through. A line in the back of his hand, taped to a little board so he couldn't bend it. A line in his scalp for a day, which they do, which is standard, which is a good vein for it, and which is the worst thing I have ever looked at, and I have since had my own eyebrow held open with a hook.

A tube down his throat and a strip of foam tape across his upper lip holding it. The tape was blue.

I could get two fingers through the porthole and touch his foot. That was the size of the contact. Two fingers on a foot three inches long.

And the sound — that's what I've got most of, actually, not pictures. A soft continuous beeping at a rate, and a hiss, and every so often an alarm going somewhere down the row that isn't yours. You learn in six hours to tell your alarm from everybody else's, the way a woman knows her own child's cry across a park.

Nuala did not go home. Not once, in four days. She slept in the chair. And she did the thing I think about more than anything else in this book, which is that she *worked* — she talked to those people as a colleague, in their language, she read the numbers off the screen herself, she asked about the antibiotic and the dose and whether they'd gone to the second agent, and when the consultant came round at seven in the morning she stood up and had a conversation with him I could not follow one word of.

She was fighting for him with the only hands she had.

And I stood against the wall.

That's what I did. Four days. In writing: I stood against the wall by the sanitizer dispenser with my hands in my pockets and said

“yeah” to people, and fetched coffee nobody drank, and once went out and moved the truck.

**Day ten, evening.** The consultant took us into a small room.

There is always a small room. Every hospital on earth has it and it is the same room and there is a box of tissues on a low table and the box is always nearly empty, which I have never understood, because you’d think that’s the one box in the building they’d stay on top of.

He said the swelling had done what swelling does. He said the scans showed damage in areas that don’t come back. He said *even in the best case*.

He was a decent man, he did it properly, and he did not use one word we had to look up. I have no complaint against anybody who works in that building. I have exactly one complaint and it isn’t with them.

**Day eleven.** The twenty-second of March, 2015. Four in the morning.

They take the tube out and put a blanket round him and hand him to you. That’s how it’s done, and it’s right, and it is also the cruellest arrangement human beings have ever devised — because the only time I held my son in that building after day seven was while he was dying in my arms.

Eleven days old. He weighed less leaving that room than he did going into it.

Nuala made a sound. I have heard men make noises with broken bones in them and I have never heard anything like it, before or since. It went on and it did not stop and a nurse came and stood in the doorway and did not come in.

And I sat on a plastic chair with my dead son on me and put my hand on my wife’s back.

And I felt nothing.

I have to be precise here, because it is the single most important fact about me and I have never once got it accurate.

It was not numbness. Numb is a thing you feel — you can report on numb, numb has a texture. It was not shock, and it was not denial, and it was not being strong for her, which is what two people have offered me over the years and which I could hit them for.

It was that the room went *administrative*.

I looked at my wife and thought: she'll need water. I thought: somebody has to call Bernie. I thought: the truck's in short-stay and it's been eleven hours.

I thought about the *parking*.

I sat there with an eleven-day-old boy going cold against my shirt and a fully functioning part of me was working the parking.

And underneath that there was a large flat calm place with nothing on it, and I have been standing on it ever since, and I did not put it there and I do not know the way off.

They gave us a memory box. It's a real thing they do and it's kind and I want that said. A card with his footprints in ink. The hat. A photograph.

It's upstairs. Second bedroom at the back. On the shelf.

I have not opened it.

Seven years. Twelve feet above the room where I sleep, in a house where I use four rooms out of eleven, there is a cardboard box with my son's feet in it.

And I want you to hold that up against what you already know I did — twenty-two months and every bone in my face, buying four-minute visits with a woman who was already gone — and notice that I never once, not for a single second, in any barn or scrap yard or truck bay or in a room three hundred feet under this city, tried to buy one with him.

I don't have an explanation. I've looked for one.

The nearest I have got is this: I could not have stood it if it had worked.

### 13. THE TOUR

Recovery, second entry. Christmas week. Let's do the tour.

**The hand.** Fifth metacarpal, left, snapped and displaced, which means the two ends had gone past each other and the knuckle had sunk into the back of my hand like a key pressed into dough. There is a dent there now, permanently, and when I make a fist the little finger sits a quarter inch lower than it used to and points slightly at my thumb, as if it's about to make a suggestion.

I did not go to an emergency room, because an emergency room asks how, and I did what men in this line of work do, which is I let Denny pull it — he took the finger and pulled straight and steady for about six seconds while I said several things about his mother — and then he buddy-taped it to the ring finger with a bit of gauze between so the skin wouldn't rot, and that was the treatment. That's the whole treatment. It healed crooked and it healed strong and it aches at about forty degrees Fahrenheit, which in this city is most of the year.

**The nose.** Broken and pushed slightly to the left, so that I now breathe about seventy percent on one side and thirty on the other, and when I lie on my back I make a sound like a coffee maker finishing.

Also: septal hematoma. Which sounds fancy and means blood collected between the wall of cartilage in the middle of your nose and the skin covering it, and if you leave it there the cartilage starves — same principle as the ear, the cartilage gets fed through the skin lying on it — and the whole bridge of your nose collapses into your face like a tent with the pole out. Denny drained it on the twentieth of December in the bathroom of his two-flat with a syringe and a needle he flamed with a lighter, and I sat on the edge of the tub, and it made a sound like a straw at the bottom of a milkshake, and about twenty milliliters of my own blood came out into a paper cup, and we both looked at it.

"Merry Christmas," Denny said.

**The face, generally.** Both eyes shut for four days. Not swollen — *shut*, so that I had to hold the lid open with two fingers to see the

sink. The left cheek stayed numb for nine weeks, from the eye down to the corner of the mouth, because there's a nerve that comes out through a little hole under the eye socket and delivers sensation to that whole quadrant of your face, and something had sat on it. When it came back it came back as pins and needles, but on the outside of my face, which is a thing I do not recommend.

Bruising went black at day two, purple at four, a real theatrical green at seven, and yellow at ten, and the yellow is the worst because yellow is when people ask.

**The forearms.** Both. Wrist to elbow. Solid bruise, front and back, with two lumps on the left ulna — the bone on the little-finger side of your forearm, the one you can feel the whole length of — where he'd hit the same spot enough times to make the bone lay down extra material. That's a real thing. Bone remodels where it gets hit. Old bare-knuckle men had forearms like axe handles and it wasn't muscle.

**Work.** Ostrowski does not roof in January so that was moot.

**Christmas.** My sister Colleen called from Naperville on the twenty-fourth and I told her I'd been in a car thing, and she said, "Another one?" and I said, "It's a bad intersection," and she said nothing for four seconds and then talked about her kids for twenty minutes, and I said the right things in the right gaps, and we hung up loving each other exactly as much as before, which is not nothing.

**The head.** Now here's the part.

For twelve days after Beecher I could not remember what I had eaten. Any day. I'd stand in the kitchen at seven at night and genuinely not know whether I'd had food since waking, and the only way to find out was to look in the trash. I put my keys in the refrigerator on the twenty-third — and yes, I know, the keys, I heard it too, I stood there with the fridge open and laughed until I had to sit down on the floor.

I had a headache the whole twelve days that lived behind the left eye and had a *taste*, which is not a thing headaches are supposed to have.

And I could not find a single word I wanted. Not big ones. I lost *spatula* for six minutes. I stood in my own kitchen holding it, saying “the — the — the flat fucking thing,” out loud, alone, to nobody.

And in the middle of that, on Christmas Day, sitting in the front room with the television on and the sound down, in the chair, *in the chair*, I noticed that I had done a piece of arithmetic without deciding to.

Beecher had taken me about thirty-five minutes and something on the order of two hundred punches to get four minutes of my wife.

Cicero had taken nine seconds and one punch to get the same four minutes.

I sat there in my father’s position with a hand taped to itself and I did not think *that’s a hundred and twenty times worse*.

I thought: *it’s still cheap*.

#### 14. THE TRADE

Denny Fewster’s tackle box.

I want a chapter on it because nobody knows this trade anymore. There are maybe two hundred men alive who can actually do it, and in twenty years there’ll be none, and it is the most obscene and most tender thing one human being does for another for money.

It’s a green Plano box, three trays, from a sporting goods place on Torrence that shut in 2004. Here’s what’s in it.

**The enswell.** A chunk of stainless the size of a matchbox with a handle on it, and it lives in the ice bucket all night so it comes out at about thirty-four degrees. You press the flat of it — press, never rub; rubbing tears the tissue under the skin and doubles the swelling — into the puffed area, hard, and hold. What you are doing is squeezing the fluid out sideways and shutting the small vessels down with cold so less arrives. You get thirty seconds between rounds and about eleven of them are the enswell.

**Adrenaline, one in a thousand.** A little brown bottle. Adrenaline clamps blood vessels shut, so a swab of it pushed hard into a cut will stop a bleed that nothing else will stop. That bottle is the whole

trade. The old men soaked the swab and then squeezed it out so it wasn't dripping, because if it runs into the eye you have blinded your own fighter, and every cutman has done that once and remembers it forever.

**Thrombin powder.** Makes blood clot on contact. Goes into a deep one you can't close.

**Petroleum jelly, in a tin, worked soft.** Once you've stopped it, you seal it — a sealed cut is a slippery cut, and the next punch goes off it instead of into it.

**Swabs, gauze, tape, a curved hemostat** — locking pliers the size of a pen, for grabbing something inside a wound.

**A scalpel.** Number eleven blade. That one needs explaining.

When an eye swells shut it is not swollen with air. It's a sac of blood under the skin: the lid has filled, there's nowhere for it to go, and it has closed the eye like a garage door. Ice will not move that inside a minute. So what a real cutman does, and what almost nobody will do now, is open it. He takes the blade and makes a small cut in the puffed lid along the natural line and lets the blood out.

It's been done to me twice. The second time was Hammond, 2007, and Denny came into the corner and said, "Look at me," and I looked at him, and he did it, and it took under four seconds, and I saw the rest of the fight, and I won it.

He was never licensed to do that. Nobody is. He did it because otherwise the fight gets stopped and the man doesn't get paid.

Think about that properly. A man kneeling in front of you in thirty seconds of quiet in a very loud room, holding your face still with his left hand, thumb on the cheekbone, cutting you with his right — so that you can go back out and be hit some more.

That's love, in the trade I was in. That is exactly what it looks like. It doesn't look like anything else and it never once gets called by its name.

**What Vic had.** A headlamp and superglue.

That's not fair to Vic. Vic had a box too and Vic was competent and Vic had no choice about the glue, because there are no rounds

down there — so there is no thirty seconds, so there is no repair. There's only afterward, on a wet floor, with a hundred and forty men going up the drift and a generator winding down.

Superglue on a face. Everybody does it and everybody knows better. The medical version is a slightly different molecule that doesn't heat up as much when it sets; the hardware-store version gets genuinely hot in the wound and kills a thin layer of tissue as it cures. It holds. It holds beautifully. And underneath, the edges have been cooked, so they never knit, and the scar comes out wide and stupid with no strength in it, and the next punch opens it wider than the first one did.

Denny told me that on a step in August and I let a man's brother-in-law do it to me in January anyway.

**And then the thing about a face.**

Here's what nobody says out loud. A cutman's entire job — the box, the ice, the adrenaline, the blade, thirty years of skill — is not to heal anybody. Nothing in that box heals anything. It is a kit for *deferring* damage by a few minutes so that more damage can be done.

He isn't a doctor. He's the man who keeps the machine running past the point where the machine is asking to stop.

And they are, to a man, the kindest people in the sport. That's not a paradox, it's just what the job does. You spend forty years with your thumb on the cheekbones of frightened men, closing them so they can go and be opened, and either you go hard as a nail or you go entirely the other way — and the ones who go the other way stay in it, and the hard ones leave, because the hard ones can't stand how sad it is.

Denny went the other way somewhere around 1979.

And in August he stood on my step in a windbreaker and told me he wasn't doing it anymore, and I told him he was just a man who watched.

I have had a lot of time to work out which of us in that arrangement was the doctor and which was the one keeping the machine running past the point where it was asking to stop.

It isn't a close call. It never was.

## **15. THE FAILED PURCHASE**

January twenty-second, the truck bay behind the transfer yard off Torrence.

Concrete floor, forty feet of it between the roll-up doors, salt tracked in from the lot and dried in white maps. Two propane heaters roaring at the ceiling doing absolutely nothing at floor level. Sixty men. A guy selling Old Style out of a cooler for four dollars and giving change out of a coffee can. Somebody's dog.

His name was Petey Sowa, he was thirty-five, he had a good beard and no chin under it, and I want to state clearly and in advance that I beat Petey Sowa comprehensively and that it was the worst night of my life to date.

Because nothing happened.

I hit him with everything I had — the good hand, mostly, the right, because the left was twelve days out of tape and I couldn't close it past halfway. I broke his orbital floor in the twelfth minute, which is the thin plate of bone at the bottom of the eye socket, thin as a fingernail, thinner, and when it goes the eye can actually sink down into the gap and the man sees two of everything on the way up. I know I broke it because Petey Sowa afterward could not look at the ceiling. He'd tip his head back and his eyes would stop tracking each other and one would drift and he'd say, "Huh."

And he hit me. Plenty. He caught me on the ear, twice, on the temple, four or five times, on the top of the head when I ducked in, which broke *his* hand, and on the mouth, which pushed my upper lip into my teeth and opened it on the inside, and a lip cut from the inside bleeds like a scandal.

And it went twenty minutes and I won it and I got up off the concrete twice and got up both times inside the count.

And I did not get her.

I have to try to explain this and I don't think I'm going to manage it. Imagine you have a wife who is dead and you have found the one door in the world she is behind, and you have paid the toll at that door twice and gone through twice, and on the third time you pay the toll — you pay it *in full*, you pay double, you pay in bone — and you walk through the door and it's the truck bay behind a transfer yard off Torrence Avenue with sixty men shouting and a dog barking and a guy giving change out of a coffee can.

I stood in the middle of that floor with a thousand dollars coming and the crowd making the noise and I thought, quite calmly:

*Not enough.*

Denny was in front of me with the bucket saying my name. There was blood coming out of my mouth in ropes and I let it. I was looking past him at the roll-up door.

"It wasn't enough," I said.

"What wasn't."

"It has to be more."

Denny Fewster stood there with a bucket in a truck bay in January and looked at me for a long moment and then he said, "Sean. What has to be more?"

And here's the thing, here's the exact thing, here's the moment I'd point to if a judge asked me when I knew:

I didn't tell him.

I had a chance, right there, to say a sentence out loud to another human being. *Denny, when I get hit hard enough I see my wife.* Eleven words. That's all it would have taken and it would have been over, because Denny would have driven me straight to Christ that night and sat in the waiting room until somebody looked at me, and I'd have been a man with a diagnosis in January instead of what I turned into.

I didn't say it because I knew — I *knew*, standing there, bleeding out of my mouth — that if I said it out loud, somebody would take it off me.

So I said: "The money."

And Denny said, "Right," and put the towel on my head, and that was that.

That's how you do it, incidentally. That's the mechanism. People think there's a moment where you decide to destroy yourself and it's dramatic and you're on a bridge somewhere. There isn't. There's a moment where somebody who loves you asks you a direct question in a truck bay and you tell them a small lie about money, and everything after that is just scheduling.

## **16. PERMISSION**

I went to Christ in February and I told myself it was about the numbness.

That's what I said at the desk and that's what I said to the resident and it was even half true — nine weeks of a dead left cheek will get a man into a building. But you don't drive forty minutes to the hospital where your wife worked, and where your son died, and sit in that lobby under that specific ceiling, for a numb face. You do that when some part of you has raised its hand.

They sent me to neurology because of the history. That's a word they use for a man who has been hit in the head professionally for twenty-two years. *History*.

Dr. Parvaneh Ashkani was maybe fifty, small, with reading glasses pushed up into her hair and a South Side accent laid over something older, and she looked at my chart for a long time before she looked at me, which I appreciated, because everybody looks at the face first and then pretends they didn't.

"Sean Vardy," she said. "Nineteen and four and one."

"You looked me up."

"My brother took me to the Aragon in 2006. You fought a Puerto Rican kid, you got outboxed for eight rounds and then you knocked

him out with a left hook, and my brother stood on his chair." She took the glasses out of her hair. "It was very stupid and I've never forgotten it."

"That's the review, generally."

She went through the face. Pressed under the eye socket, all around the rim, along the arch, made me clench my jaw with her fingers on the hinge, shone a light into both eyes for a long time, made me follow a pen, made me push against her hand.

Then she sat down and asked me about the last twelve months and I lied, and she let me, and then she asked me a different way, and I lied worse.

"How many," she said.

"How many what."

"Fights. Since the retina."

"Four," I said.

She wrote 4 on the paper and put a little mark next to it that I have thought about a great deal since, because I'm fairly sure the mark meant *no*.

"Here's what I want to tell you," she said, "and I want you to actually listen, because everybody in your line of work has heard a version of it and stopped hearing it around 1996.

"Forget knockouts. Knockouts are what got measured because knockouts are what people notice. They're not the dose. The damage tracks the *total number of impacts*. Every time your head gets accelerated and stopped. Sparring counts. Bag work counts, a little. The four hundred jabs you took in a gym in 1994 count. It's not the one that puts you down. It's the nine hundred that didn't."

"That's a lot of nine hundreds."

"Twenty-two years," she said. "Yes."

And then she told me about the umbrella.

"Inside every nerve fiber in your head there are struts. Little rods running the length of it, holding it open, like the ribs inside an umbrella. There's a protein that clips onto those rods and keeps

them stable. When the head gets shaken, hard, a lot, that protein comes loose. And once it's loose it clumps. And once it clumps it doesn't clear — the clumps sit there and they spread, cell to cell, outward. And they start in a very particular place, which is down in the folds of the brain where the blood vessels run, because that's where the shaking is worst."

"Can you see it? On a scan?"

"No," she said. "Not in a living person. Not yet. We can only find it afterward."

"So what do I do."

"You stop," said Parvaneh Ashkani.

I sat there in a paper gown in a room with a window and I thought about how to ask what I'd come to ask without asking it, and eventually I did the thing everybody does, which is I put it on a friend.

"Doc. A guy I know. He got knocked out, and he — he saw his wife. She's dead. He saw her. Not remembered her. *Saw* her. Smelled her hair."

She didn't look surprised, which surprised me.

"How long ago did his wife die?"

"Four years."

"Then his wife has been dead four years and he's a widower," she said, "and this is the most ordinary thing in the world, and nobody tells anybody, and it's a scandal that nobody tells anybody. Somewhere between a third and a half of bereaved people see or hear the dead. Half. Voices in the house, footsteps, the person sitting in a chair. It's not psychosis, it's not a breakdown, it isn't even considered a disorder. It's what a grieving brain does. It's so common that the strange thing is going four years without it."

And there it was.

I want to freeze the frame here, because this is the single most important moment in my life, and it looks like nothing. A doctor being kind and being right. Every word she said was true. She was

answering the question I actually asked her. She had no way of knowing there was a second question underneath it, because I had specifically constructed the first one to make sure she couldn't see it.

"So it's normal," I said.

"It's very normal."

"It's not the head injury."

Parvaneh Ashkani paused. I have replayed that pause maybe four hundred times.

"Grief can do it on its own," she said. "A brain injury can also do it. Damage in the memory regions can produce something that isn't a recollection — it's an *event*. Present tense. Full sound and smell. There was a surgeon in the nineteen-thirties who touched an electrode to the side of a woman's brain during an operation and she heard a song playing, in a room, from thirty years before. Not remembered it. Heard it."

"So it could be either."

"It could be either. It doesn't matter which, Mr. Vardy, because the answer to both of them is the same, and the answer is that you stop fighting."

She was wrong about that one thing and only that one thing, and it was the thing that killed me. It mattered enormously which. Because if it was grief, then it was free, and it would come again on its own, in a chair, in a house, some evening, for nothing.

And if it was the head, it had a price.

I drove home on the Bishop Ford — which I do, which I have to, because it's the road — and I felt so light I had the window down in February.

Grief hallucinations. A third to a half. Very normal. Nothing to do with the head at all.

I had permission.

She'd given me four more fights and it took me about twenty minutes to spend the first of them, and she has never once in her

life had a bad thought about that conversation, because I never told her, and I'm not going to, and that's my last decent act, keeping it off her.

## **17. HEADLIGHTS**

March. Fight five. A scrap yard in Riverdale, outdoors, half past four in the morning, because that's when the yard is empty and the gate guy is a cousin.

Twenty-eight degrees. They'd cleared a floor between two mountains of crushed sedans and lit it with the headlights of six cars pointed inward, and I want to say something about fighting in headlights, because it is the single most disorienting condition I have ever worked in and nobody warns you.

Six light sources at chest height, all pointed at the middle. So every man on that floor has three or four shadows going off him in different directions like a hand of cards fanned out. When the other fellow moves, four black versions of him move too, at four different speeds, on the ground and up the wall of crushed cars behind him. Your eye is built to track one thing. It does not know what to do with a man who arrives with an entourage.

And the beams are level with your face, so half the time you are looking directly into one and the other man is a silhouette with no features at all, no eyes to read, and reading eyes is about forty percent of what I know how to do.

His name was Dessie Pike, he was forty-one, and he was an actual professional in the sense that this was his living. Seventy-odd of these. A nose you could hang a coat on and ears like two pieces of dried fruit.

**Minutes one to six.** He taught me something.

Pike did not throw at my head for the first six minutes. Not once. He worked the body exclusively, both hands, from close, and he did it the way a man loads a truck — no emotion in it at all, just placement. Left to the short ribs. Right under the elbow. Left again, same spot.

Body work in a bare fight is the smart play and almost nobody has the patience for it, because there's no drama and the crowd hates it. But a rib doesn't heal in a night and a head sometimes does, and a man who can't breathe can't hold his hands up in minute fifteen. Pike was thirty minutes ahead of me the whole time.

**Minutes six to eleven.** I got greedy again, which is apparently my entire biography.

He'd been going downstairs so consistently that I started dropping my right elbow to cover, and at six forty he put a left hook over the top of it into the side of my head, right on the ear, and the ear went instantly hot and thick — the cartilage lifting off the skin, blood filling the gap, the whole thing swelling into a shape that is not an ear — and the world on that side turned into a seashell. That's the actual sensation. Not deafness. A roar, like a shell held to your head, permanent, with a fight going on inside it.

**Minute eleven.** The rib.

Left hook to the body, and not the liver — the other side, low, the floating ribs. There are two down there at the bottom of the cage, the eleventh and the twelfth, and they are called floating because the front ends aren't attached to anything. They just end. Which means there is nothing to brace them and nothing to spread the load, and a good hook lands on a bone that is, structurally speaking, a stick lying loose in meat.

I felt it go. Not heard — felt, a sort of dull click deep in, and then a sensation of something being *out of place* that I have never had from any other bone.

And it does not put you down. That's the joke of a floating rib. It doesn't stop you at all. What it does is arrange that from that moment on, every single breath you take for six weeks arrives with an invoice attached, and a man breathes about eighteen times a minute, and I did the arithmetic on that in the truck afterward because I do the arithmetic on everything, and it came to somewhere around four hundred and fifty thousand.

**Minutes eleven to fourteen.** He put me down twice.

First one I went to a knee and got up on the count of six. Second one I went over backward onto packed dirt with a piece of glass in it and I got up at twelve, and there is a photograph of that somewhere on somebody's phone, and I have never wanted to see it.

**Minutes fourteen to eighteen.** And then I got him.

Right hand on the temple, over a lazy jab, with about four minutes left. It was the best punch I threw in the entire twenty-two months and it landed on the flat spot in front of the ear on a man who had seventy of these, and Dessie Pike went down on one knee and shook his head like a dog with water in its ear.

The men in the headlights made the noise. That noise. In a scrap yard at ten to five in the morning in March, forty men with their breath going up into the beams, making the noise a crowd makes when something has gone wrong in front of them and they are glad.

He got up. Of course he got up. And we finished it standing, both of us, four minutes, neither man able to hurt the other anymore, just leaning and swinging, and they called it a draw because nobody had a coin.

### **VISIT THREE.**

Not in the fight. Afterward — in the car, engine running, heater on, Denny gone off to piss behind a stack of doors.

That was new. Every previous one had come inside a minute of going down, on a floor, with a man's face over me. This one came twenty-five minutes later, sitting up, in a parked Buick, with the vents going.

I noted it. I filed it. I did nothing about it. That's a sentence I could put under a photograph of my own head.

The kitchen. The four o'clock light. The cardigan, the elastic, the counter.

*Sean, did you move my keys?*

Three minutes and change, warm, complete. I could smell her hair over the smell of the heater.

And I answered her. I know I answered her out loud because Denny came back and caught the tail of it through the window.

I said: "They're in your bag, love. They're always in your bag."

Denny got in, and shut the door, and put his seatbelt on, and did not say anything for about a mile and a half.

Then he said: "Who's in your bag?"

And I said, "Nothing. Nobody. Drive."

## **18. A FOLLOWING**

Three weeks later, back in the truck bay off Torrence, and by now they knew me there.

That's a thing I should mention before this one, because it becomes load-bearing.

I had a following. By April. Not a large one and not a good one, but sixty men in a truck bay is a small enough world that an old pro with a wrecked face who never goes down easy becomes a fixture, and men would come up before and shake my hand and tell me they'd seen me at the Aragon, or on television at four in the morning on some Spanish channel in 2007. One fellow brought a program to sign. An actual program, from the UIC Pavilion, kept in a drawer for fifteen years, and I signed it on the hood of a car with a hand I could not fully close.

They liked me because I stood there.

That's the whole of it. They did not like me because I could box, because by April I couldn't. They liked me because I would take an enormous amount and remain upright and they had never seen anybody do that in person.

And they had no idea — not one of them, ever — that standing there was not courage and was not stubbornness and was not some old fighter's pride.

It was the product. It was the actual thing I was in that building to purchase. They were watching a man shop.

**Fight six.** A kid named Terrence Dawes, twenty-nine years old, ten pounds heavier than me, and fast in the way that only stops being a problem when a man is fifty.

**Minutes one to twelve.** He took me apart with a jab.

I want to spend a paragraph on that, because everybody thinks a jab is a nothing punch, a range-finder, a thing you do while you're deciding. A jab thrown properly by a fast twenty-nine-year-old with no glove on his hand is a knuckle arriving at your face at about twenty miles an hour with a shoulder behind it, and the sensation is not being punched at all. It's being *flicked in the face by a bus door*. Sharp, flat, and it snaps your head back four inches and puts water in your eyes, and he did it a hundred and something times in twelve minutes, and every single one of them accelerated my head and stopped it, and every single one of them went on Ashkani's total.

He reopened both brows in the first four minutes. The left one from Beecher, the right one from the Golden Steer and six times before that. Both went in the same minute, one from a jab and one from a hook, and after that the entire fight became a blood management problem.

Here's blood management in a truck bay. There are counts but no rounds, so between counts you tip your head all the way back — which sends it down your throat, which is its own difficulty — and Denny gets in there with a cold sponge and clears the eye sockets, and you get maybe four seconds of vision back before it fills again. Your whole tactical world shrinks to *how long since the last sponge*.

**Minutes twelve to fifteen.** Right eye gone entirely. Nose packed with clot and useless, so mouth-breathing only, which in a fight is a disaster — an open mouth is a broken jaw waiting for an appointment, and every fighter alive knows it and nobody can do a thing about it when the nose is shut.

And the cheek. I had been clenching so hard for fifteen minutes that I'd chewed the inside of my own left cheek to pieces, and there was a flap of it hanging loose in there, and my tongue kept finding it and would not leave it alone. It felt like a wet stamp. That's the

detail I'd take out of the whole book if I could — not the brows, not the rib. The wet stamp.

**Minutes fifteen to nineteen.** He hunted the chin and I let him look for it, and I want to be honest that this is the fight where I stopped fighting.

Not the next one, where I did it deliberately and made a whole thing of it. This one. Somewhere around minute sixteen against Terrence Dawes I quietly stopped trying to win and started trying to *last*, which are opposite skills, and the crowd could not tell the difference, and Denny could.

**Minute nineteen.** He hit me on the point of the chin.

The point of the chin is the far end of the lever. Everything I said about the hinge and the rotation, doubled. My legs went before my head did — that's the order, the legs know first — and I went down on my back on the concrete of a truck bay with my arms out to the sides like a man making a snow angel.

#### **VISIT FOUR.**

The kitchen. Four o'clock. The cardigan. Her hair in the elastic. All of it exactly right, and warm, and complete.

She turned around.

She said: "Sean, did you move my keys? Because they're not on the hook. Anyway."

And then it stopped.

#### **19. ANYWAY**

*Anyway.*

I want to tell you about the word *anyway* and I want you to bear with me, because it's going to sound like the smallest thing in this entire book and it is the exact place where the floor went.

Nuala Deane did not say *anyway*.

I don't mean she never used the word. I mean it wasn't in her rhythm. She was a fast talker from a family of eight and she went sideways constantly, and the way she got out of a sideways bit was

by landing on you — she'd finish with a name, *Sean*, or a swear, or a question, or the tongue in the cheek. She *closed* on you. *Anyway* is what you say when you're getting yourself out of a room. It's a nothing word. It's a word for a woman at a bus stop with someone she doesn't know well.

It was flat, too. That's the other thing. The whole sentence came out on one level. Nuala's sentences went up in the middle.

I lay on the concrete in a truck bay off Torrence Avenue and Denny Fewster's face came into the top of my vision upside down and behind him were the ceiling and the propane heaters, and my first thought — my first thought, before *am I hurt*, before *did I win*, before anything — was:

*That wasn't right.*

And my second thought, arriving before I was even sitting up, was the sound of my own voice explaining it to me.

*It's the venue.* It's noisy in here, there's sixty guys, there's a dog. You got hit on the chin and the chin is a bad one, it rotates you, it's a rough delivery, of course the signal's degraded. It's like a bad phone line. The person on the other end is fine, Sean. The person on the other end is *fine*, it's the line.

And I lay there on cold concrete with my own blood running into my ear and I bought that. Wholesale. Immediately. No haggling.

Here's what I know now about that moment, and it's the only thing I actually learned from all of this, so I'll hand it over free:

You do not get warned once. You get warned every single time, clearly, in plain language, by something inside you that has no interest in your comfort and no talent for lying. And what happens is not that you miss the warning. You *hear* the warning, and then a second voice comes in immediately behind it — fast, fluent, reasonable, full of technical detail — and explains why the warning doesn't apply in your particular case.

That second voice is not you thinking. That second voice is the addiction talking, and the tell, the absolute tell, is that it's the only voice in your head that's ever *prepared*. It's got the explanation

ready before you've finished having the doubt. Nothing honest is ever that fast.

I got up. I lost the decision. I took eight hundred dollars in an envelope with the flap tucked in.

And on the way to the car I found that I had gone from *she said something wrong* to *it's the room* to a third position entirely, which had assembled itself somewhere between the concrete and the door, and which was this:

*The signal's degrading because the connection isn't strong enough.*

*I need to hit harder. I need to get hit harder. I need a cleaner line.*

You see how that works? You see the beauty of it? The evidence that the thing is killing me had been converted, in under four minutes, without conscious effort, into a *reason to do more of it*.

I would like to meet the part of my brain that did that. I'd like to shake its hand. It's the most talented thing I have ever owned and it has never once worked in my favor.

## **20. THE MIDDLE DRAWER**

The rib made me sleep sitting up, and a man who sleeps sitting up in a front room at three in the morning eventually gets up and walks around his own house, and that's how I ended up in front of the sideboard on a Tuesday in April with a bag of frozen peas held against my side.

The middle drawer. Four and a half years.

I'd like to describe opening it as some kind of decision. It wasn't. I opened it the way you open a drawer.

### **Contents.**

One clear plastic bag, sealed, with a red-and-white printed strip across the top and a case number written on in ballpoint. Inside: a phone with a cracked screen. A wedding band. A pair of glasses with one arm bent out at an angle that made my stomach turn over harder than any of the rest of it, because a bent arm on a pair of glasses is a *velocity*, it's the only object in there that tells you the speed. A hair elastic. Twelve dollars. And her keys.

One manila envelope from Zaremba & Sons with a death certificate and two carbons and an itemized invoice, and I want to note that the invoice for burying my wife had a line on it that said MISC. — \$180.00, and that I have never found out what the misc was, and that for a while in 2018 I thought about it more than I thought about her.

One folded sheet, printed, three pages, stapled: **ILLINOIS STATE POLICE — VEHICLE CONTENTS INVENTORY.**

And I sat down on the floor of my dining room with my back against the sideboard and my ribs screaming and I read it, and it went like this:

*Front passenger seat: one (1) handbag, brown leather, contents inventoried separately.*

*Front passenger footwell: one (1) travel mug, stainless.*

*Rear seat: one (1) suitcase, hardshell, blue, approx. 26 in.*

*Rear seat: one (1) duffel bag, canvas, olive.*

*Rear footwell: one (1) box, cardboard, containing books and framed photographs.*

*Trunk: one (1) garment bag, black.*

*Trunk: one (1) plastic tote, containing kitchen items.*

I read it four times.

Now here's what happens next, and this is the part I don't know how to make anybody believe, and I've stopped trying with the two people I've told, both of whom made a face.

Nothing happened.

I read that inventory four times at three in the morning in April of 2022 — a suitcase, a duffel, a garment bag, a box with her books and her *photographs* in it, a tote of kitchen things — and my mind went smoothly and immediately to a place that had clearly been built and stocked and maintained for years in preparation for exactly this moment, and the place said:

*She was taking stuff to her sister's. Bernie was moving. She was helping Bernie move.*

And I thought: right. Bernie's move. That's right.

Bernie moved in 2019.

I knew that. I've been to that condo. I helped carry a couch up two flights in 2019 with a bad shoulder and Bernie's husband complaining about his knee, and on the fourth of November 2017 Bernadette Deane was living in the same apartment in Mount Greenwood she'd been in for nine years and would stay in for two more.

I knew that on the floor of my dining room in April 2022 and I thought *Bernie's move* anyway, and I folded the sheet along the same creases, and I put it back in the drawer, and I closed the drawer, and I went and sat on the couch and put the television on with the sound down.

I want to be extremely careful about how I describe this, because it's the single strangest thing my own head ever did to me, stranger than any of the visits.

It was not denial in the way people mean it. I did not look at the evidence and refuse it. I looked at the evidence and there was *a story already there*, waiting, fully formed, that took the evidence in and dissolved it without a sound, the way the stomach handles food. Three seconds. No effort. No discomfort at all. Not the smallest flicker of *hang on*.

That story had been built by somebody. Somebody in there had been working on it, quietly, on my behalf, for four and a half years, keeping the house standing.

And I'd like to say I found out who, and had a word with him.

But you'll notice I keep saying *I* like there's one of me.

## **21. THE NINTH OF NOVEMBER**

I put the inventory sheet back in the drawer and closed it and went and sat on the couch, and that should have been the end of it, and it wasn't, because a thing that has been sealed for four and a half years lets a smell out even when you shut the lid again.

So here is everything I have got about the fourth of November, 2017, and the week after it, laid out honestly, with the holes marked.

**What I have.**

Not the kitchen. I want to be scrupulous, because you'll get the kitchen later and I don't want any credit for having had it early. In April of 2022, sitting on that floor, what I had of that night was: an evening, an argument, a door. A grey area with a shape to it and nothing inside it. The overhead light with the moths in it, the burnt pan, the storm door shut behind the open back door, the two bags — none of that came back to me until the fourteenth of January, 2023, on wet concrete three hundred feet under the flats.

What I have always had is the knock.

Ten past one in the morning, complete, every frame, and I have often wished I could trade some of it for something else. Two of them. A trooper and a Chicago officer, because of where the road is and where the house is. The trooper was a woman about thirty with her hat off and held against her chest, which they do, which is a thing they are taught, and which I did not know was a thing they are taught until 2019, when somebody told me, and it ruined something.

She said, "Are you Sean Vardy," and I said yes, and she said, "Is your wife Nuala Vardy," and I said yes.

And then here's the part I would give a hand for.

She said: "Do you know where your wife was travelling tonight, sir?"

And I said something.

And I do not have what I said.

That's a hole. That's the second hole, and it sits four feet from the first one. Between a doorway with two bags in it and a trooper on my step there are three and a half hours, and out of the whole of that I have got a knock, a hat held against a chest, and a question I cannot hear my own answer to.

What was I doing at ten past one in the morning? Was I asleep? Was I in the chair? Had I been calling her? The phone was in the effects bag with a cracked screen, and I never looked at the log, and by the time it occurred to me to look, the carrier had cycled it, and that is a fact I sit with more often than most of the ones in this book.

### **What I did that week.**

I was, everybody agrees, magnificent.

I want to put it that way because it's the only word that fits and because it makes me want to be sick. Bernie has said it. Colleen has said it. My mother-in-law, who did not like me, held my face in both hands at the wake and said, "You have been a rock."

I did the funeral home. I chose a casket and I did not pause over the price list, I went straight down the middle column like a man ordering for a table. I dealt with Zaremba, who is a decent man with a strange handshake. I called eleven people on the fifth and told them in a clear voice and did not once make anybody comfort me. I wrote the notice. I found the dress. I stood at the door of Zaremba & Sons for two hours and forty minutes on the eighth of November and shook every hand that came through it and remembered every name.

*God, Sean was incredible.* That's what people said in cars going home.

And I have since learned enough about myself to know what that actually was.

It was the parking. It was the same functioning administrative thing that worked out the short-stay charge while my son went cold against my shirt, running at full capacity for six days, doing logistics, because logistics was the only building in me with the lights on.

Nobody at a funeral can tell the difference between a man being strong and a man not being there. I've checked. It is exactly the same performance from the outside, there is no test for it, and the whole of American mourning is built on nobody knowing that.

**The ninth of November.** Holy Cross. Rain, a canopy, a poor turnout of umbrellas.

And here's the thing about Holy Cross that I have never said to anybody, including the two people I have told the rest of this to.

They are eleven rows apart.

Fionn's is one of the small flat ones and hers is upright, and if you stand at hers and look southwest you can see his, and I have not once in seven years walked from one to the other. I go to hers. I stand there. Then I go back to the truck the long way round the drive so I don't pass him.

**And the storm door.**

That was in the drawer too, that April, and I did not go near it for a year.

One line in the report, taken down by a trooper at about two in the morning from an eighty-one-year-old woman who had been watching television with the sound up: *neighbor reports hearing storm door twice.*

I read it in April of 2022. I felt nothing at all and I put the paper back, and here's what my head did with it, in three seconds, no effort, the way the stomach handles food:

*She went out, she came back for something, she went out again. Women always come back for something.*

I want that written down exactly as it arrived, because I want you to see how good it was. It isn't just an explanation. It has a little joke tucked inside it — an affectionate, marital joke, the kind of thing a man says at a wake and everybody laughs and nobody looks at anybody.

I built the joke, and the joke did the sealing. That's the trade in this house. That's what I have instead of a cutman.

And here is what I know now, which I did not know then, which nobody but me can know, and which I will never be able to check:

There is no storm door on the front of that house.

There never has been. It's a solid door with a screen in the summer and no screen in the winter, and by the fourth of November there is no screen.

The storm door is at the *back*. The back, where the driveway is.

The back, where the hook is.

So Mrs. Zabrocki, eighty-one, next door, with the television up, heard the back door of this house bang twice on the night my wife left it. And the trooper wrote one line. And Mrs. Zabrocki died in 2020.

And I read that sentence in 2022 and made a joke about women.

## **22. TURNING IT OFF**

May. Fight seven. A function room over a Polish social club in Archer Heights, gloved, which Gaz offered me as a soft one because he thought I looked like shit, which I did.

And this is the chapter where I did the thing on purpose, so let me not dress it up.

There is a move — it isn't a move, it's an absence of a move — where you simply stop bringing the hand back. The right hand lives at your cheekbone. That's its whole job. You throw it, it comes home. You throw it, it comes home. Thirty-four years of throw-and-home, ten thousand hours of it, until it isn't a decision, until it's the same order of reflex as blinking.

And you can turn it off. It takes real work. It's like deliberately not catching something thrown at your face — the body puts up an argument, and the argument is not in words, it's a rising heat in the chest and a total unwillingness of the arm — and you have to override it, consciously, punch by punch, for about ninety seconds, and then it gives up and stays down.

I turned it off in the third minute against a twenty-seven-year-old bricklayer named Milo Ganz.

He didn't understand at first. That's the thing nobody tells you about a man who won't defend himself: it *frightens* the other guy. Milo threw a straight right at four minutes and it went through

where my hand should have been and landed flush on the cheek, and I saw his face afterward, and his face said, *what*.

I nodded at him. I actually nodded at him, like a man saying *go on*.

He hit me nineteen times in the next six minutes and I am not going to pretend I know how many of those I let happen and how many I couldn't have stopped, and that ambiguity is a mercy I have chosen to keep.

Here's the damage. The right cheekbone went. Not the arch this time — the body of it, the big flat shelf of bone under the eye that gives a face its shape — and it went in with a sensation exactly like a stone hitting a windshield, a sharp bright *tock* that I heard through the bone of my own head rather than through my ear. When that bone depresses, the face changes shape. The cheek flattens. Afterward, in the mirror, one side of my head looked like a chair somebody had sat on wrong.

And there's a nerve under there, the same one from Beecher, so the whole quadrant went numb again, and this time it stayed numb, and it is numb now, and it will be numb in the ground.

And the eye on that side stopped being level with the other one. About three millimeters low. Nobody notices unless I take my glasses off. Denny noticed in the corner and said nothing and I saw him not say it.

At minute twelve Milo Ganz put me down with a left hook and the ref, a guy named Stack, waved it off at four.

**VISIT FIVE.** On the stool, according to Denny. Two and a half minutes.

The kitchen. Four o'clock. The cardigan.

She said: "Sean, did you move my keys? They're not on the hook."

That's all. She didn't turn around. I got the back of her, and her voice, and about three seconds of the tongue in the cheek at the very end, in profile, and then it was gone.

Two and a half minutes for a cheekbone.

And on the drive home I did the thing I always did, which was the math, and the math said the exchange rate had moved again, and I said out loud in the truck, to nobody, with a face that had begun collapsing on one side:

“Fine. It’s a seller’s market.”

And then I laughed for about two miles.

I want that on the record too, alongside everything else. I was having, in some horrible way, the time of my life. Nobody ever writes that part down either. They write the misery. There’s misery, sure, there’s a whole warehouse of it. But there was also a man of forty-five, driving north on Cicero at midnight with a broken face and eight hundred dollars, who had a *purpose* for the first time since 2015, who woke up in the morning with something to do, who had stopped watching television with the sound down.

Grief is boring. That’s the thing they leave out of the pamphlet. It is unbelievably, crushingly, hour-by-hour *boring*, four years of it, and what I had found was not happiness, it was not even relief.

It was interest. I was interested again.

You’ll do a hell of a lot to stay interested. Ask anybody.

## **23. OSTROWSKI**

Roofing, since it has paid for most of my life and nobody in this account has done a day’s work yet.

Waldemar Ostrowski has a crew of six and a yard in Burnham and he has had me on and off since 2011. The arrangement is that he calls and I go and he pays cash on Friday, and in eleven years neither of us has mentioned my face.

Season’s April to November. Tear-off and re-lay, mostly. Two-flats and bungalows on the East Side and out over the Indiana line, and now and then a flat roof on a commercial building, which is hot material and a different job entirely.

Here’s what a tear-off is, since everybody has one over their head and nobody has watched it done.

You go up at seven with a roofing spade — a flat blade with teeth cut into it and a fulcrum welded underneath — and you drive it under the shingles and lever, and they come up in a sheet with the nails still in them, and you push that sheet down the pitch and off the edge into a dumpster twelve feet below. You do that from the ridge down, all day, bent at the waist, in whatever the weather is, and by three in the afternoon you have moved about four thousand pounds of material with your arms.

Then you sweep the deck and check for rot and lay felt and start nailing, and a good man does a bundle every twelve minutes with a coil gun, and the gun runs on a hose, and the hose is a trip hazard, and every man on that roof has a story about the hose.

In June of 2022 I did nine days on a two-flat on Green Bay Avenue with three cracked ribs from a scrap yard in Riverdale.

You cannot do it. That's the honest answer. Every movement on a roof is a torso movement — the lever, the sweep, the reach, the getting up off one knee — and a cracked rib draws a red line through the entire trunk. So what you do instead is find the ways to cheat. You work off both knees instead of bending. You breathe out before every lever. You take the gun and stay on the shallow sections and let the young ones have the pitch. And by the fourth day the whole crew has quietly redistributed the work around you and not one person has said a word about it, which is worse than if somebody had.

Ostrowski came up the ladder on the fifth day. Fifty-eight years old, went up it like a squirrel.

He watched me for a while and then he said, in the accent, which after thirty years in this country is entirely intact: "Sean. Is it the ribs or the head?"

"Ribs."

"Which."

"Three and four."

He nodded. He'd had four of them off a scaffold in 1996.

Then he said: "You know I had a brother."

"I didn't."

"Older." He said the name, and it is an extremely common name where he comes from, and it means nothing, and I still had to sit down on a roof in 2023 when I worked out that I had been fighting a boy with the same one. "He is in the ground in Gdansk since 1989. Twenty-six years old. He did it slowly, over about four years, with vodka, and everybody watched him do it, and everybody said — ach, it's the times. It's the shipyard. It's the country."

He looked out over the roofs toward the lake.

"That's the only thing I will ever say to you about your face," he said. "So now I have said it."

And he went back down the ladder and kept me on the crew for the rest of the season and never raised it again. He paid me on Fridays. And in October, when I could not remember which house we were on and drove to Green Bay Avenue instead of Ewing, he moved me to ground work — sorting, loading, cutting — without any discussion at all, at the same money.

I found out in 2024 that it had not been the same money. He'd been topping it up out of his own pocket since August.

That's the part that gets me, looking back at all of it. Everybody knew.

That's what I keep running into. Denny knew by December of 2021. Ostrowski had the whole diagnosis by June of 2022, off a roof, in one sentence, with no medical training whatsoever. Gaz Tunney knew and put it in a spreadsheet. Colleen knew something and could not get it out of me on a Wednesday phone call. Aurel Duca knew — I saw it go across his face in September when he was standing over me and would not throw.

There was not one person in my life who was fooled by me. Not one, at any point, for a single week.

The only man on this earth who did not know what Sean Vardy was doing was Sean Vardy, and he had a beautiful, fast, extremely well-supported argument about it that he could produce in under

four seconds, on any occasion, in any weather, at any hour of the day or night.

## 24. A SMALL DENOMINATION

June. Fight eight. Truck bay, Torrence, bare.

His name was Hollis Deed and he was fifty-one years old.

I'm going to sit in this one for a while, because it is the ugliest thing in this book that happened inside a fight, and none of the ugliness is physical.

Fifty-one. And he'd had a stroke in 2016 — the left side of his face didn't move properly, the corner of his mouth sat lower, and there was a slowness down that whole side that you could see in the way he took his shirt off.

I knew that before I said yes. Gaz told me on the phone. Gaz actually told me, unprompted, which for Gaz Tunney is practically an intervention: *he's had a stroke, Sean, in 2016, I'm just saying so it's said.*

And I said, "Fine."

I want to be precise about what "fine" was doing in that sentence, because it was not indifference. Indifference would be better. What it was doing was *arithmetic*: a fifty-one-year-old with a bad left side cannot hurt me enough, therefore this is a poor purchase, therefore I will need to make up the difference some other way.

That's what I was thinking. Not *this is a man who has had a stroke*. I was thinking: *this is a small denomination*.

**Minutes one to four.** He was better than he had any right to be for about four minutes.

That happens with old fighters. The first four minutes come out of the file — the feet, the shoulder feint, the way he stepped off to the right after throwing — all of it intact, all of it from 1994, running on something that doesn't need the damaged parts. Hollis Deed had a beautiful little step-back-and-counter that he must have thrown ten thousand times before I ever turned pro.

And then the four minutes ran out, the way they do, and there was nothing behind them.

**Minutes four to nine.** I beat him.

There's no other word and I've looked. He caught me twice, both on the temple, both good, and I felt the second one in my back teeth — and then I put him down with a right hand at minute six and he went down slowly, in sections, the way a man goes down when the message reaches his legs late.

And he got up.

He got up at fourteen because there was no one counting who cared, and he came forward with his hands where his hands used to be, and I put him down again at minute eight.

And he got up again.

Now here's the part.

I was not angry with him. There was no blood between us at all. I stood on that concrete looking at a fifty-one-year-old man with a lopsided face getting off his knees for the second time in a truck bay for four hundred dollars, and what I felt — and I'm going to write it exactly, and then I'm going to have to live in the same sentence as it — what I felt was *irritation*.

He wasn't giving me what I came for. That was the entire content of my emotional life at that moment. This man was being *hit insufficiently hard by me*, which meant I was going to have to keep hitting him, which was taking time, and none of it was going to earn me a visit, and I could feel the whole evening going to waste.

There is a version of me from 2006 who would have gone to the referee. There's a version from 2014 who would have looked at his corner. There was no referee and he had no corner, so what was actually required was for the other man in that circle to be a person, and the other man in that circle was gone, and had been since December.

I put him down a third time at nine minutes with a left hook to the body that he did not see because it came from the dead side.

And Gaz Tunney waved it off himself.

Gaz. Five foot six, quarter-zip, phone in each hand, a man who had never in his life stopped anything. He came in off the edge with his arms out saying “that’s it, that’s it, that’s it,” and he got between me and a man on the floor, and he looked at me.

I have thought about that look for a long time. It was not disgust. Gaz didn’t have disgust in him; it wasn’t in the product line.

It was the look of a man realising he has been selling something that has gone off.

## **VISIT SIX.**

The kitchen. But the light was wrong.

Not the four o’clock gold. A flatter light, an overcast light, and the room was slightly the wrong *size*.

I want to stop on that, because it is the first genuinely frightening thing that happened in one of these and I sailed straight past it at the time.

Kitchens do not have sizes in memories. Nothing does. A remembered room has no dimensions — you never think *and it was eleven feet across*, you just have the room, all at once, from no particular position. Dimensions are a thing that gets *supplied*. Dimensions mean somebody has built the room, out of parts, and made decisions about it.

This one had dimensions and they were wrong. It was too long, and the ceiling was low, and I was standing somewhere I had never stood in that kitchen in my life.

She said: “Sean, did you move the keys.”

Not *my* keys. *The* keys.

And the sentence didn’t go up in the middle. It went along, and then it stopped, like something read off a card.

Forty seconds, total.

And I got up off the floor of a truck bay having just beaten a stroke survivor half unconscious in front of sixty men, and drove home, and what I thought about the whole way was the ceiling height.

## 25. SIX MINUTES

July. Fight nine. The barn out past Beecher again — the same barn, the same pole construction, the same dirt.

In December it had been twenty-six degrees in there and you could see everybody's breath hanging in the rafters. In July it was ninety-four, and the dirt floor had gone to dust, and eighty men standing in a ring three deep had kicked that dust up into a fog that hung at head height under two work lamps and never settled all night. Everybody coughing. You could taste the floor before anything started.

His name was Ruell Sanchez and he was twenty-four years old.

Twenty-four. I want that to sit there on its own for a second the way it sat in me. I was a professional fighter before this man could read.

**Minutes one to four.** He was quick and he was wild and he threw everything from too far away, and I was picking him off, and for about three minutes I was actually enjoying myself, which by July was rare.

**Minute four.** And then he hit me.

I have no memory of the punch. I have Denny's account and I have a fifteen-second video somebody took on a phone that I watched once in 2023 and will not watch again. It was a right hand, thrown from the hip, with no technique in it whatsoever, and it landed on the jaw about an inch forward of the hinge.

**Minutes four to ten.** Gone.

Not blurred. Not hazy. *Gone*. Six minutes with nothing in them at all. There is no film, there are no fragments, there is not even the sense of time having passed. Minute four runs directly into minute ten in me like a splice.

And Denny told me afterward — sitting in the Buick with the doors open and the dome light on, at half past two in the morning — that in those six minutes I fought quite well.

That is the single most disturbing sentence anybody has ever said to me and I have had a doctor tell me I overwrote my dead wife.

Because think about what it means. Somebody kept my guard up for six minutes. Somebody moved my feet, and slipped a right hand, and stepped off to the left twice, and threw a jab that Denny says was “the best one you threw all night.” Somebody in there ran an entire fight — competently, adaptively, against a live opponent — and it was not me.

I was not present. There’s nobody home in those six minutes. And yet the machine went on operating at a professional standard in a barn in Will County, and the crowd could not tell, and Sanchez could not tell, and the only man in that building who knew that Sean Vardy had left the premises was Sean Vardy, four hours later, in a car, being told about it.

I have never found out who that is. I don’t like knowing he’s in there. And I have thought more than once, at three in the morning, that if the lights are ever going to go out on me for good, that fellow is presumably going to be the last one standing at the switch, running the place with nobody in it — and that is my honest picture of what’s coming, and it is not a metaphor, it’s just a description with a date missing.

**Minute thirteen.** The jaw.

Left side, at the angle, which is the corner where the jawbone turns up toward the ear. It’s the most common place a jaw goes, because it is the thinnest part of a long lever and the lever is eleven inches long.

You know instantly, and not from pain. You know because your *bite is wrong*. The teeth on that side come together before the teeth on the other side, by a couple of millimetres, and your whole mouth is now a door that doesn’t fit its frame. You close it and something inside meets something else too early and there’s a small dead click, and you keep closing it, over and over, the way you keep touching a chipped tooth.

I finished it. Fifteen more minutes, on a broken jaw, in ninety-four degrees, in a fog of dust that I was breathing through a mouth I could not properly shut. Sanchez put me down at twenty-eight

minutes and I got up and he put me down at minute thirty and they called it for him.

## **VISIT SEVEN.**

The kitchen. Flat light. Wrong dimensions. Too long, ceiling too low.

"Sean, did you move the keys."

Pause.

"Sean, did you move the keys."

Pause.

"They're not on the hook. They're not on the hook."

Twenty seconds. Maybe less.

And I came back on the dirt of a barn in Will County with dust in my open mouth and a jaw that didn't fit, and I was crying.

Which I had not done for my son, and had not done at my wife's funeral, and had not done once in four and a half years.

I want to be honest about why, because it was not grief and it would be a great comfort to me if it had been.

It was the way you cry when the tank runs dry on a highway a long way from anywhere. It was *supply*.

Denny got down on the dirt next to me — sixty-six years old, both knees, in the dust, in ninety-four degrees — and put his hand on the back of my neck and said, "All right. All right, kid."

Twenty-six degrees in that barn in December and ninety-four in July, and Denny Fewster in both of them, holding a bucket, calling me kid.

## **26. MAINTENANCE**

Since we're being thorough, here's the machine shop. This is what a man of forty-five does to a body between fights to keep it able to take the next one, and there is not one thing in this chapter a doctor would sign.

**Sleep.** Sitting up, on the couch, on the left side if the ribs are right and the right if they're left, with a cushion under whichever arm the hand is on. Four to five hours a night in the first week after a fight, because you keep waking when you roll. Eleven to fourteen hours a night from about day nine, because the head demands it and there is no arguing with the head. I lost most of 2022 asleep and could not tell you one dream out of it.

**Ice.** Twenty on, twenty off, first forty-eight hours, and after that it does nothing and everybody does it anyway because it feels like doing something. Bag of peas. The *same* bag of peas, December 2021 to January 2023, refrozen four hundred times, gone grey and welded into a single lump — and if you'd told me at any point in those thirteen months that the peas were the saddest object in the house I'd have laughed at you, and I'd have been wrong.

**Pain.** Here's the honest ledger, and it's the one part of this book where I'm going to be careful, because I know what happens when a man puts numbers in print.

Not opiates. I want that stated, and not out of virtue. I looked at that door twice and both times it shut for a stupid and entirely practical reason, which is that a man with a habit gets *sloppy* — and a sloppy man doesn't get up at nine, doesn't finish, and stops getting booked. And I needed to keep getting booked.

Sit with that a second. My addiction had a commercial interest in me staying clean. That is not sobriety. That's a rival firm.

So: the over-the-counter stuff, in the wrong amounts, for thirteen months. The anti-inflammatory sort in the morning, which chews a stomach, so you eat first, and then it chews the stomach anyway, and by September of 2022 I was passing something that looked like coffee grounds and I looked it up on a phone at two in the morning and then put the phone face down.

And the other kind at night, the paracetamol kind, which does nothing for a bone and takes the edge off a head, and which quietly takes a liver apart at doses that don't feel dramatic at all, because they are printed on the side of an ordinary box in a font nobody has ever read.

**Drink.** Four to six a night in the first week after, then off it entirely, because alcohol thins blood and a thin man cuts worse and bleeds longer. I was managing a face, not a mood.

**Food.** Eggs.

That's not a bit. From about April of 2022 I ate eggs, toast, and whatever the crew had at lunch, and that was the diet, because a shop is a sequence and a recipe is a sequence and I could not hold one. You'd find me in an aisle at eight at night with a basket and no idea what was supposed to go in it. Eggs you can do without a plan.

**The neck.** The one genuinely intelligent thing I did in thirteen months, and I did it for the wrong reason.

A strong neck holds the head steadier. A steadier head means the brain travels less inside the skull when you're hit, and less travel means less damage. That is real, it is the single best thing a fighter can do for his own long-term head, and almost nobody does it because it isn't glamorous and there's no bag for it.

So I trained my neck. Every day, in a garage that leans, with a strap and a plate. Forty-five years old, in January, doing neck work in the cold.

In order to take more.

There it is. I want that sitting alongside everything else in this chapter. I wrecked my stomach and my liver on drugstore pills, slept upright for a year, and ate nothing but eggs — and the one correct, evidence-based, doctor-approved thing I did with my body across the whole of it, I did so I could absorb more punishment before losing consciousness.

That's addiction, if anybody wants a definition and doesn't want to hear about chemicals.

It is not that you stop taking care of yourself. It's that the caretaking gets *recruited*. Everything in you that still works — every good habit, every scrap of discipline, every piece of hard-won professional knowledge — none of it gets destroyed. It gets hired. The whole plant is retooled and goes on running beautifully, at

capacity, with excellent quality control, producing the one product that is killing you.

I have never in my life been fitter, sharper about my own body, or more disciplined than I was in the autumn of 2022.

I was thirteen weeks from a bleed on the brain.

## **27. JUST A MAN WHO WATCHED**

The jaw was wired for five weeks and that is its own chapter of hell, which I'll spare you except for three details, because you're going to need to know how a mouth works later.

One: they don't wire it shut anymore, mostly, they plate it — they put a titanium strip along the break and screw it in through an incision inside your mouth so there's no scar on the outside, and it's a marvel, and I don't have any money, so they wired mine. Arch bars on the top and bottom teeth and steel loops between them, and you carry a pair of wire cutters in your pocket at all times in case you throw up, because if you throw up you drown.

Two: five weeks of liquid through a straw and I lost nineteen pounds, which at my weight is a lot of the wrong kind, and the wrong kind is muscle around the neck, and neck is the only thing on a fighter's body that has anything to do with protecting his head. A strong neck holds the skull steady and the brain doesn't slosh as far. So I came out of that five weeks lighter, weaker in the exact place that mattered, and more fragile than I had been at any point in my life.

Three: I did the math on that too. I did the math and the math said *good*.

Denny came over on the twenty-second of August.

He didn't come in. That's how I knew. Denny Fewster had walked into my kitchen without knocking since 2013 and on the twenty-second of August 2022 he stood on the step with his hands in the pockets of a windbreaker and would not come past the door.

"Gaz says you're on for September," he said.

"Mm."

"Say it out loud."

"I'm on for September."

"Bare?"

"Bare."

"Your jaw came out of a wire *twelve days ago*."

I said the line I'd prepared. I'd had it ready for a week, which should tell you everything.

"It's healed. It's plated with bone now, Denny, it's stronger than it was —"

"Don't." He said it quietly and it stopped me dead. "Don't do the medical thing. You've been doing the medical thing at me since Beecher. You know more about a face than any man I ever met and you've been using it like a *lawyer*."

We stood there. There was a bird going in the hedge that hasn't been cut since 2017.

"I'm not doing it anymore," he said.

"Doing what."

"The corner. The bucket. The cuts. I'm not doing it."

I did the worst thing I have ever done to another human being and I did it in about four seconds and without any planning at all, which is how you know it came from somewhere real.

I said: "Then you're just a guy who watched."

Denny didn't move. It was a hot morning and the light was flat.

"For thirty-four years," he said, "that's exactly what I was."

And then, because he is a better man than me and always was: "Your brows are gone, Sean. There's no skin left in either one, it's all scar, it's tissue paper over a doorframe. Your right cheek's dropped. And you've got a thing in your left eye, a tremor, it comes and goes, I've been watching it since June and I'm telling you now because I'm not going to be there to watch it anymore." He took a breath. "Somebody's got to do the cuts. Get whoever. Don't let it be

a friend of Gaz's, they'll superglue you, and superglue in a brow means the next one opens twice as wide."

He turned around and went down the two steps and stopped on the path.

"Marge used to talk to me," he said, without turning. "After. In the house. Two, three years. I'd hear her upstairs going through the closet. Hangers going along the rail."

I didn't say anything. I stood in the doorway of my house and I did not say anything, because if I opened my mouth I was going to ask him *how did you get her to keep doing it*, and some very small piece of me that was still working knew that was the last sentence I could ever say to Denny Fewster.

"You could have told me," he said. "I'd have understood it better than anybody alive."

And he got in the Buick and drove up Baltimore Avenue, and that was the last conversation we had for seven months, and it is the one I'd take back over all the others.

### **III. THE BELL**

## 28. THE SECOND CITY

There is a second city underneath this one and almost nobody who lives up here has ever seen a foot of it.

Not the subway. Not the freight tunnels under the Loop that everybody knows about because they flooded in ninety-two. Deeper. There are bores down in the bedrock under this whole region, cut through solid dolomite three hundred feet down, thirty feet across, miles and miles of them, dug to swallow what comes off the streets when it rains so the river doesn't turn around and put itself in people's basements. They've been digging them since the seventies. Some parts got finished and some parts got started and stopped when the money moved, and there are shafts and side chambers and access galleries down there that were poured for a purpose and then left, and there is no map of all of it in any one man's hands.

I never learned what the room was for. I asked once, early, and a guy said "it's a valve house" and another guy said "it was never a valve house," and after that I stopped asking, because it did not matter and because the not knowing was, in a way I couldn't have defended, part of it.

Here's how you get there.

You park in a lot off a service road in the industrial flats where nobody has any reason to be at ten at night and you walk about four hundred yards along a fence with the weeds up past your knees. There's a gate with a chain on it that has been cut and rejoined with a padlock that is not the county's padlock. Behind the gate is a concrete apron and a steel headhouse the size of a two-car garage with no windows and a door that has been unbolted and rebolted so many times that the bolt holes are all wallowed out.

Inside the headhouse the sound changes immediately. Everything gets close and slightly wet-sounding.

There's a cage. An open steel basket about six feet square hung on a cable, with a bar across the front, and it is run off a hoist that somebody's cousin maintains and I am not going to tell you how I feel about that. Six men at a time. You put your hands on the bar

because there is nothing else, and a man up top pulls a lever, and you go down.

It takes about ninety seconds.

The first thirty you can still see the mouth of the shaft above you, a square of orange city sky getting smaller like something being closed. Then it goes. And then you are in a shaft with rock walls two feet from your face going up past you in the beam of somebody's flashlight, wet rock, streaming, and there's a smell that comes up to meet you that is the smell of the actual planet — cold stone and standing water and iron — and under it, faintly, sewage, not fresh, old, a sort of sweet gray ghost of it that gets into your clothes and comes home with you and is still in the truck in the morning.

Your ears go. Everybody's do. Men swallow and yawn on the way down like a plane coming in.

And the temperature drops and then it *stops* dropping and holds — it's about fifty-four degrees down there in December and about fifty-four in July, because three hundred feet of rock does not care what month it is — and that steadiness is the first genuinely unnatural thing about the place. Everything alive up here is seasonal. Down there it is one temperature forever.

Then the cage stops with a bang and you get out into the gallery.

Sodium lamps on stands, four of them, run off a generator two hundred feet up the drift so the noise of it is a low constant grinding underneath everything, felt more than heard, like being inside a stomach. Sodium light is orange and it does something specific to human skin: it takes the red out. Every man down there looks slightly like a photograph of himself. Blood looks black. That's not a figure of speech. Blood on the concrete under sodium light is black, and it stays wet-looking for hours because nothing evaporates down there, and by the end of a night the floor has these black continents on it that the next crowd stands in.

The room itself is a chamber maybe sixty by thirty with a curved ceiling and walls of poured concrete gone the color of an old tooth, and every surface has water on it. Not dripping — *sheeting*. It

comes through the joints in a slow permanent seep and runs down the walls in sheets that shine, and it collects along the base and runs off somewhere and you never see where. The whole room is quietly, continuously raining down its own sides.

The air is thick and it tastes like a coin. You breathe it for six hours and you cough for two days.

There's no ring. There's a circle of men, a hundred and forty of them by the end, standing in the wet with their breath in the orange light, and they don't shout the way they shout in a truck bay because you can't — the sound comes back at you off a curved ceiling, and a hundred and forty men making noise in a concrete tube is unbearable, physically, so the crowd down there stays low, and what you get instead is this constant close *murmur*, right up against you, like men talking in the next room in a hospital at four in the morning.

And there's the bell.

It's a locomotive bell. Bronze, about nine inches, on a bracket welded to a piece of angle iron driven into a wall anchor. Somebody found it somewhere. It has a rope on it.

There is one bell to start.

There is one bell at the end.

And the end is when a man does not get up.

That's the whole ruleset. There are no rounds. There is no minute. There is no stool, no count, no ref pulling you off, no doctor at the apron, no towel, because there is no corner to throw it from. Two men go into a circle of a hundred and forty in a wet concrete room three hundred feet under Illinois, and it goes on, continuously, without pause, until one of them is on the floor and stays there.

I want you to sit with that for a second, because I did.

Everything I had done up to that point had an *architecture* to it. Rounds are mercy. A count of twenty is mercy. A referee is mercy. Even in a barn in Beecher there was a structure that periodically stopped the damage and asked you, in effect, *do you want to keep*

*doing this*, and you had to answer yes, out loud, with your body, every single time.

Down there nobody asks you anything.

The first time I stood in that room, in September, with the murmur going round the walls and the water sheeting and the generator grinding away up the drift and my breath orange in front of my face, I felt something I have to describe accurately, and the accurate description is embarrassing.

I felt *welcomed*.

Because I had been trying for ten months to find a place with no mercy in it, and I had been buying it in ugly little increments off Gaz Tunney like a man scoring pills, and here was a room, purpose-built, three hundred feet below the city where I was born, where the whole concept had simply been left out of the design.

The ceiling down there is the entire weight of Chicago. Everything: the streets, the yards, the schools, the churches with the copper roofs, Holy Cross Cemetery where my son is, Baltimore Avenue, the hedge, the house with four rooms in use.

All of it directly above your head, all of it *off*, all of it somebody else's problem, for as long as this takes.

I have never been anywhere so quiet in my life.

## **29. THE HUNDRED AND FORTY**

Somebody should account for the men in that room, because I was one of them for four months before I was ever in the middle of it, and because the whole thing only works if a hundred and forty people agree to stand in a wet concrete tube under the city and watch.

Nobody goes down a shaft on a ladder and a cable at eleven at night in November by accident.

Here's the arithmetic of the room, because it is all arithmetic down there and I was the only man who ever said so out loud.

**Twenty dollars at the top.** A folding table in the headhouse and a man with a coffee can. A hundred and forty men is twenty-eight

hundred dollars, which pays the fighters, the generator, the diesel, the hoist man, and Gaz's cut, and leaves enough over that somebody down there was doing well and I never found out who.

**The betting.** That's the real economy and it goes on in a low murmur off the walls. Not a bookmaker — men, in twos and threes, in cash, with a third man holding it, and I want to be clear that on the fourteenth of January, 2023, when I fought Marek Sowinski, money changed hands in that room on the question of whether I would get up, and the men holding the middle of those bets were standing eleven feet from me while I did it.

**Who they are.** Not gangsters. I want that stated because it's the assumption and it's wrong and the truth is much worse.

Tunnel guys and their brothers-in-law. Operating engineers. Two firefighters I recognised from a card in Cicero. A man who did tile with Duca. Guys off the crews at the refinery, guys from the barges, guys who work nights at the intermodal yard in Harvey and finish at ten and have nowhere to put the rest of themselves. Men in Carhartt with reading glasses pushed up on their heads. Men in their sixties. A guy with an oxygen concentrator he'd left in his truck because he wasn't carrying it down a ladder.

I have never in my life been in a room with a lower proportion of people I would call dangerous. That's the thing. That's the thing that took me months to work out.

They are not there for violence. They can get violence anywhere in this city for free.

**What they're there for.** I worked it out in October, standing at the back with a face like a road accident, watching two men I didn't know go for nineteen minutes.

They're there because there is no arrangement left, anywhere in the ordinary world above that ceiling, in which a man is permitted to find out what he actually is.

Everything up there is insured. Everything is licensed and padded and stopped early by a man in a shirt, and I'm not against any of that — I'd have had the retina at thirty-three either way. But there is a thing in men, and I've had it since 1988, which is a *question*,

and the question is: how much? How much of it can I take before I'm not me anymore, and where exactly is that line, and what's on the other side of it?

Nearly every man will go his whole life without an answer. That's not a tragedy, it's just an unpaid bill, and most of them carry it fine.

But it's a bill, and a hundred and forty of them went down a hole in the ground on a Saturday night to watch somebody else settle it in cash.

That's what they murmured for. Not for the blood — you can tell, the blood quiets them. What lifts that room is a man getting up. Every time. Second knockdown, third, fifth, eleventh, and the noise comes off that curved ceiling and it is not a cheer and it is not bloodlust.

It's relief.

Because if he can, then maybe you could. That's it. That's the whole transaction, a hundred and forty times over, twenty dollars each.

**And the other thing.** There were men down there buying exactly what I was buying and we all knew it and not one of us ever said a word.

Duca had something. Threadgill had that scar on his throat from a night nobody ever asked about. Curtis Wardell was forty-five years old and came down a ladder in December for twelve hundred dollars, and nobody does that for twelve hundred dollars. Hollis Deed had had a stroke and he still got up twice off a floor in a truck bay, and I *hated* him for it at the time, and I understand now that what I was looking at was a man with the same disease, at a different stage, being served by the same supplier.

There is a whole culture down there and its single organising rule is that you never ask a man why he's here.

I used to think that was hardness. It isn't. It's the last piece of decency any of us had left — because every man in that room understood, without being told, that the *why* was the only thing anybody had that could still be taken off him.

**And this.** In four months I never once saw a woman in that room.

I don't have a clever thing to say about it. I just noticed it around November and I have thought about it since, and the nearest I've got is that whatever the hundred and forty of us thought we were doing down there, it required, absolutely and without exception, that nobody was watching who might have said *what are you doing*.

Three hundred feet of rock over your head does the same job as a locked bathroom door. That's all the tunnel ever was.

It's just that there's more of it.

### **30. SHE LAUGHED**

September. Fight ten. The first one down the shaft.

His name was Aurel Duca and he was thirty-three and he had come to this country at nineteen and he did tile work, and he weighed two hundred and twenty pounds, and I weighed a hundred and eighty-eight after the wire.

The man who did my cuts was called Vic. That's the whole of what I know about Vic. He had a fishing tackle box and a headlamp and hands like a plumber's, and he was competent in the way of a man who has done a thing without ever being taught it.

The bell went.

Minute one to minute four, I boxed him. Genuinely. He was slow and he was square, feet in a line like a man reading a plaque, and I put the jab in his face maybe thirty times and moved off to his left and made him turn, and turning tires a big man faster than punching does. I split his lip in the third minute against his own teeth and I saw the black run down onto his chin under the sodium and I thought, *I can win this*.

That's the thing that catches you every time. Somewhere in the fourth minute of every one of these, the old animal wakes up and says, *actually, let's win*. Thirty-four years of training does not know it has been repurposed. Thirty-four years of training thinks we're still trying to get on television.

Minute six he hit me on the top of the head.

I'd ducked, badly, and he was coming down with a right, and it landed on the crown, which is the hardest bone you have and the last place you want anything to land, because the neck is not built to take force straight down the column. Two things happened at once. His third and fourth knuckles broke — I heard it, and afterward his hand looked like a bag of marbles — and something in my neck went, some sheet of muscle behind the ear, and for the rest of the fight I could not turn my head to the left, so half the room became a place where things came from.

Minute nine to minute nineteen is the worst ten minutes of physical experience I have ever had and I include the jaw.

He got me against the wall.

That's the specific thing about that room, and if you take one detail from this chapter take that one. There are no ropes, so there is nothing to lean on and nothing to bounce off, but there *is* a wall, poured concrete, running with water, and when a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound tile setter walks you back into it there is nowhere else in the world to be. Your shoulder blades are on wet concrete. Your heels have nothing behind them. The crowd is off to the sides, close enough to touch, murmuring.

And he hit me for ten minutes.

Not continuously. Nobody can. He'd hit me eight or nine times and then he'd put his head on my chest and breathe, and I'd stand there holding a man up with my back against a wall three hundred feet underground, both of us wheezing like old dogs, and then he'd push off and start again, and we did that — I counted afterward, from what Vic told me and what I have — nine or ten times.

The damage, in order.

Right brow, opened in the tenth minute, and it went to the bone straightaway because Denny was right, there was no skin left in it, just eight years of scar with no give in it at all, and scar doesn't split, scar *parts*, like a seam.

Left brow, twelfth minute, same.

By minute thirteen I was blind in both eyes with blood, and Vic could not do anything about it, because there is no between. There's no round. There is nobody to wipe your face. You are simply a man in a room with blood in both eyes and no arrangement exists for fixing that, and so you fight blind, and you fight it by feel, forearm against his forearm, reading him off contact like a man in a dark house.

Fifteenth minute he broke the orbital rim over my left eye — that's the frame of the socket, the hard ring, and when the top of it goes there's a step in it afterward that you can feel with your thumb for the rest of your life, and I can feel it now, a little ledge, like a badly hung door.

Sixteenth minute, the nose again, fifth time, and this time it went flat rather than sideways.

Somewhere in the seventeenth I stopped being able to keep my hands up. Not decided. The arms went. There's a thing that happens where you tell the arm and the arm receives the message and does about forty percent of it, and there's no pain and no drama, they simply become somebody else's arms hanging on you.

And Aurel Duca, who was not a bad man, who was a tile setter with a broken hand three hundred feet underground, put me down at nineteen minutes with a right hand I did not see, and I went down on the wet concrete on my face.

And the bell went.

### **VISIT EIGHT.**

I have to tell you about this one properly. I owe it that. Because everything before it was a rehearsal and everything after it was a demolition, and this — this was the thing itself, the best four minutes of my adult life, and I am not going to be shy about it just because of what it turned out to be.

It was a Saturday. I knew it was a Saturday the way you know things in there, without being told.

The light in the kitchen was the four o'clock gold coming in over the sink, and there was dust turning over in it, and the radiator was

ticking, and outside somebody two houses down was running a leaf blower, and there was a smell of the coffee that had been in the pot too long.

She was at the counter in the blue cardigan with her hair up in the elastic, and she was cutting the ends off flowers. That's what she was doing with her hands. She was cutting the ends off a bunch of supermarket flowers on the diagonal and dropping them in a jar, and I had not remembered that in four and a half years and there it was, the small green mess of the ends on the counter, the way she held the scissors like a knife.

And she turned around and she looked at me, and she was *thirty-eight*, she had the little vertical line she got between her eyebrows, and she said:

"Sean, did you move my keys?"

And I said, "They're in your bag."

And she said, "They're not in my bag, I looked in my bag, don't do the thing where you say the bag."

And she laughed.

That's what I got. That's what came back that night, and had never come back before: she *laughed*. She put her head back about an inch and laughed at me in a kitchen in Hegewisch with green stems in her hand.

And I could smell her hair, and the coffee, and the cut stems.

And I said, "I love you," out loud, three hundred feet under Illinois, on a wet concrete floor with my face open in four places, and a hundred and forty men in the orange dark listening.

She said: "I know. Help me find my keys."

Four minutes and forty seconds.

That was the last time she was ever real.

### 31. GOING UP

Getting a broken man up out of that place is its own event and nobody thinks about it beforehand, including the men who run it.

You cannot carry somebody in the cage. There isn't room to lie down and there isn't a stretcher and there is no arrangement whatsoever, because the whole enterprise is predicated on nothing going seriously wrong, which is a thing that men in that room believed with the fervor of the religious right up until it did.

So two of them stood me up and put my arms over their shoulders and walked me the two hundred feet up the drift, and I was awake for that, in the sense that my eyes were open, and here is what that walk was:

Orange lamps behind me getting further away. A rock ceiling four feet over my head, wet, with a bolt pattern in it. Water running along the base of the wall on the left. The generator getting louder as we got closer to it and then unbearable as we passed it and then falling away. Black footprints on the concrete — my own, going the other way, from earlier, when I'd walked in. A hundred and forty men standing back against the walls in the dark to let us through, not saying anything, most of them, and a few of them saying *good man, good man*, which is what they say, which means nothing, which I have said myself.

And the taste of the air. Wet coin, and old sewage, and now blood as well, because my mouth and nose were full of it and every breath came through it.

They put me in the cage and one of them held me up by the back of the belt.

Ninety seconds.

Going up is worse than going down, and I want to try to explain why, because it's the only part of that whole night that has stayed with me as a kind of nightmare rather than as a fact.

Going down, you're going somewhere. There's a destination and the shaft is a corridor.

Going up, you are a broken thing being *raised* through three hundred feet of rock toward a hole. And you can see the hole the whole way. It starts as nothing, a fleck, and it grows, and it is orange, because the sky over this city is always orange, and it comes down to meet you very slowly, and there is nothing to do for ninety seconds but hang on a bar and watch the world reopen above you, and I remember thinking, with a clarity I have not had since:

*You have to go back up there. She isn't up there.*

That was the first time it came at me in exactly that shape. Not *I want to see her again*. Not *I miss her*.

*She's down here and I have to go back up.*

You could not have told me a more dangerous sentence if you'd spent a year drafting it.

They put me in the back of somebody's Tahoe and a guy named Kev drove me to my truck and asked me four times if I wanted the hospital, and each time I said no, and on the fourth he said "your face is not right, man, your face is *not right*," and I laughed, and he stopped asking.

I sat in my own truck in a lot off a service road at five past two in the morning with the mirror pulled down and the dome light on and I looked at it.

Both brows open to the bone, gaping — not bleeding much anymore, just open, and you could see the pale in the bottom of the right one, which is the bone of the brow ridge, which I had never seen before, which does not look like anything, which looks like the inside of a shell.

Left orbital rim stepped. You could see it in the mirror as a change in the outline of my own face, like a fence with a post kicked out.

Nose flat and lying about fifteen degrees to the left of where God put it, and both eyes closing fast, the left already down to a slot.

Lips split top and bottom. Two teeth loose on the lower left, which I could rock with my tongue, and which I later lost.

And the swelling had already gone so far that there was no shape left to my face at all — no cheek, no jaw, no eye sockets, just a smooth risen mass with holes in it, the way a face looks in the last stage before it stops looking like a face, and I want to say plainly that if you had put a photograph of that in front of anybody who loved me they would have made a sound.

And I sat there and looked at it and here's what I thought.

I thought: *she laughed*.

I put the mirror up and I drove myself home to Baltimore Avenue through empty streets with one eye and a face like a dropped cake, and I was — I'm going to say it, because if I start lying here then all the rest of it is worthless — I was *happy*.

It's four in the morning in September and a man is driving north with his face destroyed, and he's happy, and the reason he's happy is that he has just spent four and three-quarter minutes in a kitchen with his wife, who laughed at him about her keys, and who has been in the ground at Holy Cross since the ninth of November 2017.

That's the middle of the story. Everything from here is the bill.

## 32. THE SIX DAYS

Six days between a wet floor three hundred feet under the flats and a chair in an office at Christ, and I spent them alone in a house in Hegewisch doing my own medicine, and somebody should write down once what that actually is.

**Night one, four in the morning.** Home. Truck in the drive. I did not make it past the kitchen.

You cannot lie down. That's the first thing nobody tells you. A face in that condition is a pressure system, and horizontal is the worst thing you can do to it, so you sit — upright, on a kitchen chair, forearms on the table, head forward — because forward keeps the blood running out of the nose instead of down the back of the throat, and blood down the throat at that volume makes you vomit, and vomiting with a face like that is an experience I would put up against anything that happened in a fight.

I sat at that table from four in the morning until about nine, awake, upright, thinking about nothing at all, with a dish towel that started out white.

**Night one, later.** The brows.

Both open. The right one to the bone along close to two inches. And it is four in the morning on a Sunday, and we have already established what an emergency room asks, and how many times it asks it, and who comes and sits down afterward.

So: kitchen sink. Hot water. Dish soap on the skin around it and never in it. You irrigate — that's the whole of wound care, and every field manual on earth says the same thing, the solution to pollution is dilution — so you fill a plastic cup and pour it in there, over and over, twenty cups, thirty. And it hurts in a way that being punched does not hurt, because it is *slow*, and because you are doing it to yourself, and because you can stop any time you like.

Out of the right brow came grit. Actual grit, off a floor three hundred feet down. And a piece of something black about the size of a match head, which I got with tweezers, and after which I sat on the bathroom floor for a while.

Then butterfly strips — six on the right, four on the left — which held about nine hours and then didn't, because a brow moves, and because the skin around them was too wet with the weeping a big wound does for the first two days.

**Day two.** The worst of it. Day two always is; the swelling peaks somewhere between thirty-six and forty-eight hours and then starts back down.

I could not open either eye. Worse than usual on the left, because the rim underneath it was broken, so the architecture had shifted and the lid wasn't sitting on anything.

I held it open with two fingers to look in the mirror, and what was in the mirror was not a face with injuries on it. It was a smooth risen thing, purple-black across the whole left side, going green-yellow down at the jaw, with a nose lying flat and off to one side, two wet red lines where eyebrows had been, and a mouth that was not centred.

I said, out loud, alone, in a bathroom: “Well. There goes the modeling.”

I made that same joke four months later in a hospital bed in front of my sister and she laughed and then went out into the corridor.

Nobody heard it the first time. That’s the thing about a man on his own. All the material’s wasted.

**Day two, evening.** The nose again.

Fourth time. You already know what it is and what happens if it stays in there, so I won’t do the lecture twice — the short version is that the bridge of a man’s nose has a shelf life once the blood is behind it, and mine was on the clock.

Denny had done this for me four times. Bathroom of his two-flat, syringe, needle flamed with a lighter, a paper cup, twenty seconds.

Denny had stood on my step in August in a windbreaker.

I did it myself, at half past nine at night, in the bathroom on Baltimore Avenue, with a diabetic’s needle from a pharmacy on Torrence and a flashlight held in my teeth, in front of a mirror, on the inside of my own nose.

I got about half of it. The angle is impossible on yourself. You cannot see up your own nose and hold a light and work a syringe with a hand that’s missing a knuckle, and I gave up at ten minutes with maybe half of it out, and that is why the bridge on that side has a soft place in it now that gives under a thumb.

**Days three to five.** The head.

This is the stretch that frightened me, and I want to be accurate about what frightened me, because it wasn’t the pain.

Day three, I got up to make eggs and found the pan already on the burner, cold, with butter in it, and no memory whatsoever of putting it there. I stood in my kitchen and worked out from the state of the butter that it had been sitting there about an hour.

Day four, I talked to somebody on the phone about a bill for eleven minutes, hung up, and could not recall one word of it — including whether I had agreed to anything.

Day five, around six in the evening, I was standing in the hall and I did not know which way the front room was.

Two seconds. Maybe three. My own house. Thirteen years in it. I stood in the hall and had to work it out from the light.

That's the one. Everything else in this account you can argue with me about — the fights are a choice, the visits are a mystery, the arithmetic is at least arithmetic. But standing in your own hallway in the dark at forty-five years of age, not knowing where the front room is, six days after paying four minutes and forty seconds for a woman who does not exist —

that isn't a transaction anymore.

That's a man going out like a pilot light, in the same house his father did it in, in the same front room, thirty-odd years later. And the only difference between Emmett Vardy and me is that it was done to him by a steel company, and I paid a man in a quarter-zip twelve hundred dollars a night for the privilege.

**Day six.** The right brow went yellow at the edges and started to smell faintly sweet, which is a smell you only ever need described to you once, and I got in the truck and drove to Christ.

Not because I was frightened for my brain.

Because I was frightened of losing the eye. And a man with one eye can't get booked.

### **33. NO FILE**

So on the sixth day I drove to Christ, because a wound that goes yellow at the edges is not a wound anymore, it's a *situation*, and I have seen what happens to men who let a face infection run.

They cleaned and closed both brows — twenty-two stitches on the right, fourteen on the left, done by a resident who was maybe thirty-one and who did not say one single word to me the entire time and whose jaw was set so hard I could see the muscle going. They scanned my head for the orbital rim. And somewhere in that process a name went into a system, and four hours later, when I was sitting in a corridor waiting to be discharged with a paper cup

of pills, Parvaneh Ashkani came around the corner with a folder under her arm and stopped dead.

She didn't say anything for a while. She just looked at my face.

"Come with me," she said.

Her office had a window that looked out at a parking structure. There was a photograph on the desk of two grown daughters at somebody's graduation and a small brass thing on the shelf that I later learned was a bird.

"How many," she said.

"Doc —"

"How many since February."

"Six."

She sat back. "You told me four, in February. Total."

"That was also a lie."

"I know it was a lie, Mr. Vardy, I put a mark on the paper." She took the glasses out of her hair and set them down, and she did it very carefully, and I understood that she was managing herself. "I want to say something to you and I want to say it without the kindness on it, because I gave you the kindness in February and you took it out of here and you *used* it."

I didn't say anything, because she was right, and because I hadn't known she'd worked that out.

"You asked me about your friend," she said. "The one who sees his wife."

"Yeah."

"There is no friend."

"No."

"How many times?"

And I told her. I sat in a chair in an office with a view of a parking structure and I told another human being for the first time, out loud, all of it, from a VFW hall in Cicero in December through a barn and a scrap yard and a truck bay and a room three hundred

feet under the flats, and the count, and the exchange rate, and the arithmetic on Christmas Day, and how it had started at nine seconds and one punch and was now up to nineteen minutes and two brows and a rim.

It took about nine minutes to say. Four and a half years and it fits in nine minutes.

When I stopped she was quiet for a long time. Then she said:

"Eight times."

"Eight."

"All right." She got a piece of paper and turned it sideways. "I'm going to tell you something now and I need you to understand that this is not the part where the doctor tries to frighten you into behaving. I'm long past that with you. This is a piece of information about how your head works that you don't have, and once you have it, everything you've told me means something different than what you think it means. Are you listening."

"I'm listening."

"When you remember something," she said, "what do you think is happening?"

"I'm — looking it up."

"Right. That's what everybody thinks. There's a thing in there, on a shelf, and you go and get it and you look at it and you put it back." She drew a small box on the paper. "That's not what happens. There's nothing on a shelf. There's no file. The memory doesn't exist anywhere as a whole object. It's kept in pieces — the picture in one place, the sound in another, the smell somewhere else entirely, the feeling of it somewhere else again — and when you remember, you *build it*. From parts. Right then. Fresh, every time."

"Okay."

"So what you experience as looking at a photograph is actually more like — a workshop. Every single time you recall your wife, you are assembling her, from components, in the conditions of that moment."

"Fine. So?"

"So," said Parvaneh Ashkani, "here's the part nobody's told you. When you're done, it doesn't go back the way it was. It goes back *the way you just built it*. The version that gets saved is the version you just made. That's not a flaw, it's the design — it's how a memory can update, how you learn that the dog that bit you is dead now and stop being afraid. Every recall is a rewrite. Every single one. There is no way to look at a memory without changing it. It's not a photograph. It's more like — a story a family tells at Christmas. It's still true. But it's not the same as it was in 1994, and nobody in that family did anything wrong."

I sat there. Outside, a car went up a level of the parking structure.

"You are recalling your wife," she said, "under the worst conditions a human brain can be placed in. Not tired. Not drunk. Not sad. You are calling her up in a concussed brain, in the minutes after severe rotational trauma, in a state where your language is falling apart, your ability to hold a sequence is gone, your emotional tone is flattened, and the very structures that build memories are being physically shaken. That's the workshop you've been using. Eight times."

"But she's *complete* in there. Doc, she's more complete in there than she is anywhere —"

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure. That's what a seizure-like event feels like — it feels realer than reality, it always has, that's been documented for ninety years. That's not evidence she's intact. That's evidence of what's happening electrically in the part of your brain that produces the feeling of *this is real*." She leaned forward. "Mr. Vardy. When you noticed she said a word she'd never say. When you noticed the light was wrong. When she started repeating herself. What did you think that was?"

"The venue," I said. "The connection."

"There is no connection," she said. "There's no line and there's no person on the other end. There is one copy of Nuala in this universe and it is in your head, and every time you go in there under a hammer, you come back out and you *save over her*."

I want to describe what that felt like physically because that's the only part I can describe.

There's a thing in a fight where you get hit and you don't feel it and you know from the *sound* — from what it sounded like inside your own skull — that in about a second and a half you're going to be in trouble. And there's that second and a half. And in it you're completely fine.

I had that. In the chair.

"How much," I said.

"How much what?"

"How much of it's gone."

And she said the thing that I have thought about every day since, and she said it gently, and she didn't look away, which I have never forgiven her for and which was the correct thing to do.

"I don't know," she said. "And here's what I want you to understand and it's the worst part, so brace up. *You can't know either.* You have no independent copy to check against. You can't hold the new one up next to the old one, because the old one is what got written over. Whatever's in there now will feel exactly as true as what was in there in 2017. That's what it feels like from the inside. It always feels like the original."

"So I can't tell."

"You can't tell. Nobody can tell. That's true for all of us all the time, incidentally, we're all doing this — but the rest of us are doing it slowly, in ordinary conditions, over decades." She put the pen down. "You've done four decades of drift in ten months, with a hammer."

I said: "I've been overwriting her."

"Yes."

"Eight times."

"Yes."

"And it's permanent."

"There's nothing to restore from," said Parvaneh Ashkani. "You're it. You were the only copy of her, Sean. That's what a widower is."

### **34. LEVEL FOUR**

I did not go home. I sat in the truck in the garage at Christ, on level four, next to the elevators, for two hours and ten minutes.

And I want to lay out exactly what a man does with that, because I think people imagine there's a collapse, and there wasn't one, there was something much more efficient and much worse.

#### **First I argued.**

For about forty minutes I argued with a woman who wasn't there, and I argued *well*, because I've had thirty-four years of being the guy who explains injuries, and I know how to sound like I know.

She said memory is rebuilt from parts. Fine. But some things don't degrade — the phone number of the house I grew up in, that's forty years old, it's fine, I can say it right now. So the whole *everything drifts* business is overstated. Certain things are welded in. Nuala is welded in.

She said the visits feel realer than reality because of what's happening electrically. Fine. But that cuts both ways. If a damaged brain can make something *feel* real that isn't, then a damaged brain can also *reach* something that a normal one can't. She can't have it both ways. She wants to say the damage produces a false thing, and I'm saying the damage produces a *door*, and neither of us can look inside, so it's her word against mine.

She said there's no independent copy. Fine, Doc. Then how do you know it's been overwritten? By your own argument you can't check either. You've got no more access than I have. All you've got is a theory about what *ought* to have happened to the tissue, and I've got four minutes and forty seconds of a woman cutting the ends off flowers.

That was the best one. I got to that one at around the eighty-minute mark and I actually said "there you go" out loud in an empty truck.

#### **Then I did the arithmetic anyway.**

Because that's the trouble with arguing well. You win, and the winning takes forty minutes, and then there's the rest of the two hours.

Ten fights. Eight visits — I had thought of it as eight *visits* and Ashkani had said *eight times* and it was the same number and it was not the same number at all, and once you've seen that, you can't unsee it.

Visit one: four minutes, warm, complete. She turned around. The keys. The tongue in the cheek.

Visit two: four minutes. Warm. Same.

Visit three: three minutes. Same.

Visit four: *anyway*.

Visit five: two and a half. She didn't turn around. I got the back of her.

Visit six: the light was wrong. The kitchen had *dimensions*. *The* keys, not *my* keys. Forty seconds.

Visit seven: she said it twice. Then she said the hook line twice. Twenty seconds.

Visit eight: four minutes forty. Complete. The best one. The flowers. The laugh.

And there it was.

That's what I'd been holding onto since September, without ever putting it in a row — *it got better again*. The degradation wasn't a line going down. Six and seven were rubble and then eight was the best of the whole lot. So the whole overwrite theory falls apart, doesn't it, because you cannot overwrite something into being *more* complete.

I sat in level four with my hands on the wheel and I felt the relief come up through me like heat off a road.

And then, somewhere around the two-hour mark, a very quiet part of me — the same part that had said *that wasn't right* about the word *anyway*, that same flat unimpressed employee who has been

in there my whole life and has never once been wrong and has never once been listened to — that part said:

*Or you built a better one.*

Not *recovered*. Not *reached*. Built. With more material, in a longer session, under a heavier hammer, in the finest workshop I'd ever had access to: nineteen minutes against a wall three hundred feet underground.

Six and seven were what the truth looked like when it was falling apart.

Eight was what a *forgery* looked like when it finally came out right.

I sat with that for about ninety seconds and then I did the thing I want on my headstone.

I said, out loud, in a parked truck on level four of a hospital garage, to nobody, with twenty-two stitches in one brow and fourteen in the other:

"Then it works."

Because look at it. Look at it honestly, from where I was sitting.

If the visits were her, then every one I bought was a theft from the last copy of my wife, and I was a man robbing a grave with his own head, and I'd already done it eight times and couldn't give any of it back.

But if I was *building* her — if that's all it ever was, an assembly job in a damaged room — then nothing was being destroyed at all. There was nothing there to destroy. She'd been gone since 2017 and the thing in the kitchen was a construction, and constructions can be improved, and visit eight was the proof, and the workshop was three hundred feet under the industrial flats and it was open every second Saturday and Gaz Tunney would put me on the card if I texted him.

Do you see it? Do you see what it does?

Both answers pointed down the shaft. There was no version of the truth, none, that put me on a road going anywhere else. I had reasoned my way, in a parking garage, with genuine rigor, from a

doctor telling me I was destroying my wife's memory to a solid intellectual foundation for going back and doing it four more times.

I want to say something for anybody who's ever loved somebody like me, because I've been on both sides of this and the other side is worse.

We are not stupid. That's the thing you have to give up. You keep waiting for us to understand, because you think this is a shortage of information, and you keep bringing more information, better information, a doctor, a scan, a printout.

We understand. We understood before you did. We're smarter about it than you are, we've thought about it more hours than you have, and we will out-argue you in front of any jury you like.

The intelligence isn't the brake. The intelligence is the *engine*.

I turned the key and went down four levels of ramp and paid fourteen dollars and drove home.

### **35. ROSTAM AND SOHRAB**

I went back twelve days later to get the stitches out, which is a five-minute job done by somebody who does it forty times a week, and she found me in the corridor on the way out.

She had a coffee and a lanyard and the look of a woman nine hours into something.

"Your face is healing badly," she said.

"My face has been healing badly since 1991."

"I mean the rim. The step's setting. It won't come out now."

"I know."

We stood there. It was the corridor between the elevators and the walkway, with the vinyl floor and the light that makes everybody look like they've been up all night, which everybody has.

"You're going back," she said.

I didn't answer, which is an answer.

She looked at her coffee. And then Dr. Parvaneh Ashkani did a thing I did not expect, which was that she said, "Do you know the Shahnameh?"

"The what?"

"No. Of course not." She rubbed her eye. "It's a book. It's the book, where I'm from, it's a thousand years old, it's kings and heroes, it's a hundred thousand lines of poetry and my grandmother knew about a third of it by heart and I know about nine stories badly." She checked her watch and then visibly decided not to care about her watch. "There's one everybody knows. I'm going to tell it to you wrong. My grandmother would take my ear off."

"Go on."

"There's a hero. Rostam. He's the greatest man alive, everybody knows him, he's the one they send when nobody else can do it. And when he's young he passes through a place and there's a woman, and he doesn't stay, and he leaves her a token — an armband, an onyx thing — and he says, if it's a girl, put it in her hair, if it's a boy, put it on his arm. And he goes.

"And it's a boy. Sohrab. And he grows up enormous and fearless and he grows up hearing who his father is, and everything he does, he does to find him.

"Years later, there's a war. And a young champion comes out on the other side, and nobody can beat him, and so they send for Rostam. And the two of them come out to the ground in front of both armies and they don't know each other. The boy asks. That's the thing that kills you. The boy asks — twice, three times, he says *are you Rostam*, because he's heard, and something in him knows — and the old man says no. Out of caution. Out of tactics. He gives a false name."

She turned the coffee cup around.

"They fight for two days. And on the second day Rostam gets him down and puts a knife in him. And the boy is lying there dying and he says: my father is Rostam, and when he hears of this he will come for you. And Rostam tears his armor open and there's the armband on his arm."

Somebody went past us with a cart.

"And that's not even the worst part," she said. "The worst part is what comes next. Because there's a remedy. There's a medicine in the king's treasury, and it works, everybody knows it works, and it would save the boy. And Rostam sends for it. And the king — who has his own reasons, who's frightened of Rostam, who is being small — the king *delays*. He doesn't refuse. He delays.

"And the medicine arrives, and it's too late, and the boy is already dead."

She looked at me directly.

"That's the story. A man kills the one thing in the world he'd have died for, with his own hands, over two days, in front of everybody, and he only finds out what he's done at the very end. And the cure for it existed the entire time."

"That's a hell of a bedtime story."

"They're all like that," she said. "That's the whole book. That's why it's a thousand years old."

And then she said the other thing, and I only understood it much later, and I'm putting it here where it happened rather than where it landed.

"There are two words," she said. "From much older than the book. *Druj*. It means the Lie. Not lying — not you saying you'd had four fights. The Lie. The thing that runs the wrong way underneath the world and looks completely convincing. And *asha*, which is the other one. The true order. What's actually the case."

"And?"

"And in the religion, the whole job of a life — the *entire* job — is you stand on the side of the true thing. That's it. That's all that's asked of anybody."

"Even if it's terrible?"

"Especially then," said Parvaneh Ashkani. "It doesn't say anywhere that it's kind. It only says it's true."

She put the coffee in the bin without drinking it and went back down the corridor toward the walkway, and she didn't say the words again, ever, and she never explained them to me twice.

I thought about it for the whole drive.

Not the two words. I filed those and they sat there like a stone in a shoe for months.

What I thought about was the medicine, and the king who delayed. That's the part that got me. Because that's not a story about a man who kills his son. Any fool can write that. That's a story about how the thing that would have saved him was *sitting in a room the whole time*, and it arrived, and it arrived at the wrong hour, and being late is the same as never for the one lying on the ground.

I remember thinking, on the Bishop Ford, going north past the exit:  
*Well, I'm not late. I've got it in my hand.*

I had it exactly backwards. I always did. She told me the whole thing straight out in a corridor in September and I heard a story about a man who was too slow, and it was a story about a man who was told the truth and preferred the other thing.

### **36. YOU DIDN'T EVEN CRY**

Fight eleven. October. Down the shaft.

A man named Bo Threadgill, thirty-nine, out of Hammond, and he had a scar down the front of his throat from something that wasn't fighting.

Twenty-six minutes, and I'm going to give you all of it, because it is the last one where two men were doing something to each other rather than one man making a purchase.

**Minutes one to four.** He was better than me and we both found out inside ninety seconds.

Threadgill fought out of a low crouch with his lead hand down around his belt, which looks like an invitation and is not, because a hand at the belt has further to travel and therefore comes up from *underneath* — from outside your vision — and you cannot see a punch that starts below your own eyeline. He hit me three times in

the first two minutes with a left uppercut I never saw once. Not *didn't pick up in time*. Never saw. Three times, under the chin, straight up the middle. What an uppercut does that a hook doesn't is drive the head backward and up, which stretches everything down the front of the neck and slams the back of the skull onto the top of the spine, and after the third one my jaw felt loose in its hinges the way a gate is loose.

I put the jab in his face and he took it on the forehead on purpose, which is a professional's move — you eat the jab on the hardest part of your head, deliberately, because it costs you nothing and it costs the other man a hand.

By minute four I understood I was going to lose this, and I felt, God help me, *relieved*.

**Minutes four to nine.** The brow.

He opened the right one at four minutes ten with a short left hook, and it did not open like a cut, it opened like a hem. That stitch line — twenty-two of them, twenty-two days old, taken out in a five-minute appointment in a room with a vinyl floor — let go along its whole length at once, and it took the tissue either side with it. So what I had was not a laceration. It was a *flap*: an inch and a half of eyebrow and the skin above it, hinged along the top, hanging.

I want to describe what that is from the inside, because it is the strangest physical sensation I have ever had, and I have had my jaw broken.

It's cold. That's the thing. Cold, in a warm place, and *moving*. There is a piece of you on the outside now, and it swings when you move, half a beat behind, and every time you turn your head you feel it go and then slap back against the wet.

And nothing can be done about it. There is no between. No round, no thirty seconds, no Denny with a thumb on my cheekbone and a number eleven blade. Vic stood at the edge of the circle with a tackle box he was not permitted to open until it was over, and he told me afterward that he had it on the floor and unlatched at minute five and then stood there with his hands at his sides for twenty-one more.

So I fought with my own face hanging off me, and a minute later I stopped being able to see out of that eye, and it was almost a mercy, because at least then I couldn't feel it in the light.

**Minutes nine to fourteen.** I had the best five minutes of the whole run.

That's what I want on the record. Blind on the right, face open, thirteen months into this, and for five minutes down there I boxed the way I could box in 2006.

Because he came in. He'd smelled it, and men smell it, and he stopped being careful — and a careful man who stops being careful is a gift.

I turned everything a quarter to the left so the dead side pointed away and made him come round into the live one. I stopped throwing the right entirely. Jab, jab, hook off the jab. An old man's combination that every fighter alive sees coming and nobody can do anything about if the feet are right. I hit him with that hook eleven or twelve times in five minutes and by minute thirteen Bo Threadgill's left eye was closing and his mouth was open.

And at thirteen forty I put him down.

Right hand over the top, on the temple — the only right I'd thrown in five minutes, which is exactly why it landed — and he went down on one knee in the black water with his bare hand flat on the concrete, breathing.

A hundred and forty men made a low noise off a curved ceiling.

And there is no count.

Down there, when a man goes down, *nothing happens*. Nobody counts. Nobody comes in. It hangs there, two men in a room and one of them on a knee, and it is entirely up to the one standing whether he steps in and ends it.

I stood over Bo Threadgill for about four seconds.

And I didn't finish him.

I have never satisfactorily explained that to myself. I've offered myself two versions. Version one is decency: he was thirty-nine, he

had a scar on his throat, he was on a knee in a hole in the ground, and something in me that was raised right would not do it.

Version two is the true one, and I know it's the true one because it arrived first, in about a fifth of a second, fully formed, with a reason already attached:

*If you stop it now, you don't get her.*

**Minutes fourteen to twenty-one.** He got up, and he had my number, and he made me pay the whole bill in one go.

At fourteen ten his thumb went into my left eye. Not on purpose — bare hands means fingers, and fingers in a small dark space means eyes, and everybody who has ever done this knows it and nobody has ever solved it. It went in at the inside corner, past the lid, and there is a noise your head makes at that moment which is not a noise at all, it's a white flash, and then the eye floods and shuts and stays shut. There was a bright orange smear across everything on that side for four days after, which I did not tell anybody about.

So: both gone. Right one blind under blood, left one blind under water and its own lid. Seven minutes of forearms up, chin behind them, staying in contact with him and reading him off the pressure on my arms the way you feel along a wall in a blackout.

He cracked the third and fourth ribs on the left at eighteen minutes with a right hand under the arm while I was tied up. A cracked rib announces itself immediately as a bright horizontal line about eight inches long that lights up on every single inhale for six weeks, and there is no way to fight without breathing, so you simply agree to be electrocuted forty times a minute until this is over.

At twenty minutes he took the top left canine out. Not chipped — out, the whole tooth with the root on it, and there was a sound conducted up through the jawbone into my ear like a fence post coming out of frozen ground, and then a hole my tongue found instantly and would not leave alone, hot and open and four times the size it turned out to be. I found that tooth on the floor afterward with the light of a phone. It's in a drawer and I don't know why.

**Minutes twenty-one to twenty-six.** The wall.

He put me on it at twenty-one and I stayed on it for five minutes, and there is nothing to describe except the arithmetic, so here's the arithmetic. A man who is not being counted, in a room with no rounds, against a target that cannot get off a wall, throws about one every six to nine seconds, because that is the rhythm of a tired man hitting something stationary. Five minutes is three hundred seconds.

Call it forty. On top of the sixty or so before it.

And Ashkani's voice, which I had been carrying around for three weeks like a stone in a shoe: *it isn't the one that puts you down, it's the nine hundred that didn't.*

I remember thinking that on the wall, at about minute twenty-four, in the orange dark, in the middle of it.

*There they are.*

And I remember one more thing, and this is the closest I ever came to stopping, and nobody has ever heard it.

Around minute twenty-five, with my back on wet concrete and my face hanging off me and a tooth somewhere on the floor and a man hitting me every seven seconds, I heard my own voice, very clear, from a long way inside, and it said:

*You could just sit down.*

Not *stay down*. Sit down. Like a man at the end of a shift.

And I said no.

Out loud, apparently. Threadgill heard it. He told Vic afterward that the old guy said no to somebody in the middle of the twenty-fifth minute, and that it put the wind up him worse than anything else that happened down there.

**Minute twenty-six.** Left hook on the hinge of the jaw. I went down on my face in the water and I did not get up and the bell went.

## **VISIT NINE.**

The kitchen. The four o'clock light — I want to say the light was right, but I don't trust myself on the light anymore.

She was at the counter and she turned around.

And she said:

"You didn't even cry."

I have gone over this ten thousand times and I can tell you exactly how it sounded, which was: perfectly normal. Conversational. Not cruel in the delivery at all. She said it the way you'd say *there's no milk*.

I said — I don't know what I said. Something.

And she said: "You didn't cry at the hospital and you didn't cry at Zaremba's and you stood there at Holy Cross with your hand on my back like a man at a bus stop and you didn't cry, and then you sat in that fucking chair for three years."

And I said, "Nuala —"

And she said, "Don't."

Thirty seconds. Then it was gone and I was on wet concrete with a hundred and forty men going round the walls and Vic's headlamp in my one working eye and his hands already in the tackle box, twenty-one minutes late.

Now here is where I have to be very careful, and it's the hardest bit of honesty in this whole account, so let me do it slowly.

Everybody who's heard this — both of them — has said the same thing, which is: *that's your own guilt talking. That's not her. You put that in her mouth.*

And I know. I know that's the obvious reading and it's probably true.

But I want to enter one thing into the record, one small thing, and then I'll shut up about it.

Nobody knew.

I never told anybody that I didn't cry for my son. Not Denny. Not Colleen. Not one human being on this earth in seven years. It's the thing I put in chapter eleven and said *I want it written down* about, and the reason I said that is that it had never been out of me before, not once, in any form.

So either that sentence came from my own guilt, dressed up in my wife's voice, which is what any sensible person thinks —

— or the room three hundred feet under the flats had finally got down far enough to reach the woman who *actually knew me*, and she had opened with the truest thing about me, first, the way she always did, because Nuala Deane did not do small talk and never in her life had she started with the keys.

She'd been asking about the keys for eight visits before this one.

She'd never once asked about the keys in her life without following it with something else.

I lay on the concrete with my face in four pieces and a tooth somewhere on the floor and I thought, for the first time since December:

*What if the nice one was the fake?*

And then I got up, because they need the floor.

### **37. REHEARSING HER**

I spent November trying to fix her at home. It was the stupidest month of my life and I'd like it noted that it came from love.

The logic was clean. If she's built from parts — Ashkani's word, *assembled* — then the parts must still be in the house. Objects hold pieces. The smell of a coat holds a piece. So: gather the parts, rebuild her properly, in good light, sober, in a chair, without a hammer. Do it *right*, the way you'd restore something. And then next time I go down I'll have a good clean master copy in my hands and the damage can't get at it.

That was the plan. I actually wrote it on the back of an envelope.

So I opened the house.

For twelve days I went into rooms I hadn't been in since 2017. I opened the bedroom door and took the bathrobe off the back of it and held it — and I was right, I was a man holding a bathrobe, and then what, and the answer is that you put it on the bed and you stand there.

I got out everything. The four hundred and eleven photographs. Her books, which she'd read in the bath so half of them are swollen. Her handwriting: shopping lists, a birthday card, three years of a work diary with nothing in it but shift times and the initials of people she liked and didn't. The green jacket. The elastic from the plastic bag with the case number on it.

And I sat in the front room with all of it laid out and I *worked*. Hours a night. Trying to run her in my head, deliberately, like a film. Trying to make her turn around.

Here's what happened, and this is the part nobody warned me about and I'd have paid a lot for the warning.

Every time I did it, she got a little more like the kitchen version.

I'd start with something specific — an argument we had in a Hyundai outside her mother's house in 2016 about her brother — and about six seconds in, the Nuala doing the arguing would soften. Her sentences would get shorter. She'd stop landing on me and start drifting. The vicious, fast, mean, funny thing that could take the roof off a room kept sliding, every session, toward a nice woman in a cardigan in nice light who was patient with me.

Because I was building her out of what I had. And what I had was the kitchen version, nine times reinforced, run into the ground like a footpath across a lawn.

You understand what I was doing? I was going into the vault every night with the forgery in my hand and using it as the reference.

By about the twentieth of November I could not get her to say anything unkind to me. Not one thing. And this is a woman who once told me, in a car, in traffic, that I had "the emotional range of a parking meter," and I could no longer make her say it. I could recite the sentence — I've got the words, the words are here on this page — but I could not get *her* to say it. The words came out flat, in my voice, like a man reading a card.

I had a woman in my head who agreed with me about everything and forgave me for all of it and stood in nice light asking about her keys.

And it was around the twenty-second, at about two in the morning, with the whole house open and every light on and my dead wife's belongings covering two rooms, that I sat down on the stairs and understood the actual shape of what I'd done.

It's not that I lost her.

It's that I *replaced* her with somebody who was easier to be married to.

Nine times. In a barn, in a scrap yard, in a truck bay, in a room under the flats. Every single visit I had gone down there and come back up with a version of Nuala Deane that was very slightly warmer, softer, more forgiving, less *there* — and I had been calling that a miracle.

And there is only one way that keeps happening in one direction.

Somebody in there was choosing.

I put everything back. Took me two days. Bathrobe on the door. Photographs in the box. And I called Gaz Tunney and got on the December card and did not sleep well for the rest of the month.

### **38. WHERE'S MY BAG**

Fight twelve. December, down the shaft, and it was fifty-four degrees down there like it is every day of the year, and up top it was nine with the wind off the lake, and the difference made the shaft breathe.

A man named Curtis Wardell, forty-five, exactly my age, which felt like a joke somebody was making at my expense.

Twenty-two minutes.

Two things worth recording.

The first is that I could not remember, at any point during that fight, how long it had been going. Not roughly. At all. There was no sense of elapsed time whatsoever — no *we must be about ten minutes in* — and it turns out that keeping a running count of how long a thing has been happening is a job that something in your head does for you, quietly, free, your entire life, and when it stops doing it you are simply in a permanent now with no idea how you

got there or how long you've been. It's not frightening at the time. That's the trouble with all of it. It's only frightening afterward, when you're describing it.

The second is that I cut him.

I want to put this down because it's the last time in my life I did something in a fight that a coach would have recognized. Wardell had a scar on the outer edge of his right eye, an old one, pale, running down and out. And I saw it in the sodium in the fourth minute and thirty-four years of training said *there*, and I put the jab on it — not the hook, the *jab*, the ruler, over and over, thirty or forty times on one square inch of a man's face — and at minute nine it came apart like wet paper and blinded him on that side, and I walked him into the wall with it and hit him nine times in a row.

He went down. He got up.

That's the thing about the room. Getting up is the only thing there is to do down there. Nobody stops it. So Curtis Wardell got up blind on one side and I did it again, and he went down, and he got up, and I remember thinking, distantly, in an admiring sort of way:

*You poor bastard, you're in the same business I am.*

Because he was. Of course he was. Nobody comes three hundred feet down a shaft in December for twelve hundred dollars. Everybody in that room was buying something and none of us ever said one word about it to each other. A hundred and forty men in a hole under the city, all of us with a reason, and the whole culture of the place was that you never, ever asked, which I used to think was hardness and I now understand was the last shred of decency any of us had left.

He put me down at twenty-two with a right hand that I honestly think was thrown at random.

## **VISIT TEN.**

The kitchen. Grayer than it should be. Colder.

She wasn't at the counter. She was standing in the doorway that goes through to the hall.

That's new. In nine visits she had never once been anywhere but the counter.

And she said, one sentence, flat, level, no rise in the middle:

"Sean, where's my bag."

That's it. That's the whole visit. Maybe six seconds.

I came round on the concrete and I said out loud, to a room of a hundred and forty men, "It's in the car."

Vic said, "What's in the car?"

I said, "Nothing."

And I lay there with my ribs going and one eye and a headache with a taste to it, and I thought about a printed sheet from the Illinois State Police that had been folded along the same three creases for four and a half years in the middle drawer of a sideboard twelve feet from where I sleep.

*One (1) suitcase, hardshell, blue, approx. 26 in.*

*One (1) duffel bag, canvas, olive.*

And the story came, right on time, three seconds, no effort, no discomfort at all:

*Bernie's move.*

But this time — and this is the only credit I will ever take in this entire account — this time, some flat unimpressed part of me that has never once been listened to said, from a long way off, in a voice with absolutely nothing in it:

*Bernie moved in 2019, Sean.*

And I said, out loud, on the floor, in the orange dark:

"Shut up."

### **39. THE WORST THING I EVER DID**

His name was Marek Sowinski and he was nineteen years old.

I'd seen him twice in the gallery, standing at the back where the new ones stand, and I'd asked Gaz about him, and Gaz said he was a Polish kid out of Portage Park, that he'd had a few in the truck

bay, that he was an animal, that he'd knocked out a thirty-two-year-old in ninety seconds in October, and that he was nineteen and had never been down the shaft.

"He's got no experience," Gaz said. "He's got the other thing."

"What's the other thing?"

"He doesn't stop," said Gaz Tunney. "You know. Some of them just don't have the part that stops."

I said: "Put me in with him."

Gaz said: "Sean. He's twenty-seven years younger than you and he's got two hands and you've got a face like a road accident. That's not a fight, that's a —"

And then Gaz Tunney, five foot six, quarter-zip, phone in each hand, a man who had never in his life told anybody to do anything, stopped, and did not finish the sentence.

"January fourteenth," he said.

That's what I asked for. That's what I got. And that's not the worst thing I did, that's just the arrangement.

Here's the worst thing I did.

On the second of January, in the afternoon, I drove up to Portage Park and I found the kid at a gym on Milwaukee, and I waited outside in the truck until he came out with a bag over his shoulder and earbuds in, and I got out and said his name.

He knew who I was. That's the first thing. He took the earbuds out and his whole face changed and he said, "You're Vardy." Nineteen years old, and somewhere in his life there'd been a card at the Aragon on a screen, or an uncle who'd told him, and here was the actual man on a sidewalk on Milwaukee Avenue with a dropped cheek and two brows made of scar.

"I want to buy you a coffee," I said.

We sat in a Dunkin' for fifty minutes.

He was — and I want this in, because it matters, because if he'd been a thug this would be a much easier chapter to write — he was a *sweet kid*. Big, thick-necked, with a gap in his teeth and a laugh

that came too easy, and he called me sir twice before I got him to stop, and he told me about his mother's back and the shift he worked at a distribution center in Franklin Park and about a girl who had recently made a decision he was still processing. He asked me about the Aragon. He asked what it was like to be on television.

And then he asked me, shy, the way you ask a man you admire, whether I had any advice.

And I gave him some.

I said: forget the body. Everybody your age goes to the body because it feels solid and it makes a noise. Body work wins you rounds and there aren't any rounds down there. Go to the head.

I said: the brow ridge is where you start. Everybody thinks you go to the chin. The chin ends it, but the brows *open* it, and once a man's got blood in his eye you can do whatever you like. And on an older fighter the brows are already scar — there's no skin left in them, it's all patch, and a patch doesn't stretch, so it parts on the first good one.

I said: the temple. Flat of the fist won't do it, you'll break your hand on the top of the skull. It's the front two knuckles, straight through the wrist, on the flat spot in front of the ear. That one turns the head around its own axis and that's the one that puts a man out.

I said: when he's against the wall and he's holding you, don't stand off. Let him hold you. Breathe. And then start again. Nobody's going to stop you.

I said: and if he goes down and gets up, and goes down and gets up, don't back off out of respect. That's the mistake everybody makes the first time. You back off, you let him gather, and the whole thing goes another twenty minutes and you both get wrecked. If a man wants to keep getting up, the kindest thing on this earth is to put him all the way out.

And Marek Sowinski, nineteen years old, wrote it in his phone.

He wrote it in his phone.

And then he thanked me — he *thanked* me, he shook my hand with both of his — and he said, "I got a guy on the fourteenth, down the

tunnel, my first one down there,” and I said, “Yeah, I heard,” and he said, “You know who it is?”

And I said, “No.”

That’s it. That’s the worst thing I’ve ever done.

I have thought about it more than I have thought about the visits, more than I have thought about Fionn, more than I have thought about anything, and I want to lay out precisely what it consists of, because the surface of it isn’t the crime.

The surface is: a man arranged his own beating.

The crime underneath is:

I took a nineteen-year-old boy with a laugh that came too easy and a mother with a bad back, and I made him the instrument. I stood on a sidewalk on Milwaukee Avenue and I picked him up and turned him into a tool for getting something I wanted. I gave him a technical education in how to destroy a specific human face, which was mine, so that on the fourteenth of January he would be efficient about it, and I did not tell him.

Because he would have said no. That’s the whole point. That kid would have said no in a heartbeat, he’d have said *I’m not doing that, that’s fucked up*, he’d have been *appalled* — nineteen years old and more decent in one afternoon than I’d been in fourteen months — and I knew that, and so I withheld the one piece of information that would have let him choose.

I took his consent off him and I did it in a Dunkin’ with a coffee.

And there’s an after. That’s the part people don’t get to when they’re being generous with me. It isn’t that I used him for an evening. It’s that whatever came of the fourteenth of January, he was going to have to carry it, at nineteen, for sixty years, and I *set that up*, deliberately, with technical advice, in a doughnut shop, from a man he’d watched on television as a child.

I paid for his coffee. He said thanks. I remember I said, “Keep your hands up,” and he laughed.

You want to know what a transgression actually is? Everybody thinks it’s the blood. It’s not the blood. I have described more

damage in this book than most people see in a lifetime and none of it is transgressive, it's just *meat*, it's just what happens when bone meets bone at speed.

A transgression is a man on a sidewalk in Portage Park in January, being kind, being generous with his time, giving a boy the best technical advice he has, and knowing exactly what he's doing.

#### **40. ELEVEN SECONDS**

Fight thirteen. The sixth of January, truck bay, Torrence.

I could not wait twelve days. That's all this chapter is. The fourteenth was arranged, everything was in place, the kid had it written in his phone, and I could not get from the second of January to the fourteenth of January without something in between, so I took a fight on the sixth in the truck bay off Torrence for four hundred dollars against a man whose name I did not catch and have never learned.

Four hundred. I'd been getting twelve hundred down the shaft. I took four hundred to fight a stranger in a truck bay eight days before the biggest beating of my life, and if you want the medical chart of what I had become by January of 2023, that transaction is the chart.

He was young and he was terrible and he hit like a door and it took him fourteen minutes.

The damage: nothing new. That's what I remember about it. There was nothing left to break for the first time — every structure in my face had already been broken and healed wrong, so it all just went again along the old lines, brows, nose, the rim, the arch, like a man kicking in a door that's already off its hinges. Vic wasn't there. Somebody's brother-in-law put superglue in the right brow, which Denny had told me not to let happen, and which fused the flap down crooked and is the reason my right eyebrow now sits about four millimeters higher than the left and gives me, according to my sister, a permanent expression of mild surprise.

I went down at fourteen minutes.

**VISIT ELEVEN.**

Here is all of it. I'm not editing.

— light. Not four o'clock. Not any hour.

— the counter. Not the whole counter. A corner of it, and the edge of the sink, and nothing behind it, no window, no wall, just an absence where the rest of the kitchen should be, and I could not look at it directly, the way you can't look at the middle of your own eye.

— blue. The cardigan, or the color of it, without a shape.

— the hair elastic. That was clear. The elastic on her wrist, and the two little marks it makes in the skin, and the small dark hairs caught in it. Very clear. Clearer than anything.

— a sound like the start of my name. Not my name. The shape a mouth makes going into it.

— hook. The word *hook*, on its own, with no sentence around it.

— and something turning. Something in the room turned away from me, or turned toward me, I could not tell which, and there was no face on it either way.

Eleven seconds. Vic's brother-in-law counted, later, when I asked, because he'd noticed me go still.

Eleven seconds.

I came round on the concrete of a truck bay off Torrence Avenue with a mouthful of my own blood and a superglued eyebrow, and I lay there, and the propane heaters were roaring at the ceiling doing nothing at floor level, and I understood something with total clarity for the first time since a VFW hall in Cicero thirteen months earlier.

She was nearly gone.

Not *the connection was bad*. Not *the venue*. I had run out of the thing. I had gone into the drawer eleven times and there wasn't much in the drawer anymore, and what was left was an elastic and the word *hook*.

And a normal man — and I want to make sure you understand that I know what a normal man does here, I've always known, I have

never at any point in this been confused about what the correct action was — a normal man gets up off that floor and goes home and never does it again, and spends the rest of his life protecting the eleven seconds he's got left.

I got up off that floor and thought:

*Then the fourteenth has to be the big one.*

Because there was one thing left in the account and I was going to spend all of it at once, on the largest purchase available, in the deepest room in the city, against a nineteen-year-old boy I had personally trained.

I want to be clear that this was not despair. People assume despair. Despair would be a comfort to me now.

It was *planning*. It was the same feeling as a man booking a flight.

## **IV. ASHA**

## 41. THE CORRIDOR

The fourteenth of January, 2023. Here's the day.

I woke at six on the couch in the front room, because that's where I sleep, all nights, four years and change of nights, and the first thing I did was lie there for a quarter of an hour trying to establish what day it was, which by January was simply part of waking up, like a piss.

Then the inventory. You do it lying down, before you move, because if you do it standing you'll fall over and then you've learned nothing. Ribs: three and four on the left, eight days out, sharp on the inhale, fine on the exhale, so breathe shallow and don't laugh. Right hand: the two middle knuckles swollen and hot, some crap in there from the sixth, grip about seventy percent. Left hand: the crooked one, cold-ache, fine. Neck: the thing behind the left ear that never came back after Duca, so no looking left, so the world stays a half-circle. Right eye: fine. Left eye: the orange smear from Threadgill's thumb, mostly gone, some flicker at the outside edge like something moving that isn't. Head: taste behind the left eye. Present. Constant. Metal, and slightly sweet, like blood and a battery.

Then I got up and I didn't fall over, so: a good day.

**Breakfast.** Four eggs, dry toast, no coffee, which is a rule I've had since 2003 — no caffeine on a fight day, because caffeine puts your heart at a hundred before you've done anything and then you've got nowhere to go. Also I drank a liter of water at eight and a liter at noon and nothing after two, because a dehydrated brain sits lower in the skull and has further to travel before it hits the wall, and that is not a metaphor, that's the actual mechanism, and every fighter in the world dries himself out to make weight and every one of them is buying a slightly worse concussion.

I hydrated. I want that in the record. I did the one thing that was good for me, on that day, out of thirty-four years of habit, like a man polishing the shoes he's going to be buried in.

**Two in the afternoon.** I cut my nails. Bare hands, and a nail catches and tears off backward and then you've got a finger you can't use.

**Half past two.** I shaved the eyebrows down with a beard trimmer. Everybody thinks that's for the look. It's so hair doesn't get carried into the cut, which is how a brow goes septic.

**Three.** I greased my face. Vaseline, heavy, on both brows, the nose, the cheekbones, worked in with two fingers, and the point of it is that a fist slides off grease and grabs on dry skin, and every fraction of a second of slide is force that goes past you instead of into you. I did it standing at the bathroom mirror on Baltimore Avenue with the light on, and I looked at the face while I did it: the dropped right cheek, the stepped rim over the left eye, the nose flat and off-center, the right brow four millimeters high courtesy of a man's brother-in-law and a tube of superglue, the gap on the top left where the canine was.

Forty-six years old.

I said out loud, to the mirror: "You handsome bastard."

**Four.** I sat in the front room with the television on and the sound down and I did not think about anything at all for two hours, and that is the truth, and if you've never had a fight day you won't believe it, and if you have you'll know exactly what I'm describing. The whole day is a corridor. You're not nervous. Nervous ended around 1994. You're just *going along it*.

**Six.** Boots. Not shoes — work boots, laced tight to the top, because that floor is running with water and a man who slips down there gets kicked in the head by accident by his own opponent, which I have seen. Two pairs of socks. Track pants. A T-shirt I didn't care about, which is a sentence with a lot in it.

**Half past six.** Wrapped my own hands. Bare fight, so it's not padding, it's a wrist strap — two figure-eights around the wrist and the base of the thumb and nothing over the knuckles, and it's the only thing standing between you and your wrist folding backward on the first good shot. I've had Denny Fewster wrap my hands since

1988. I did it myself at the kitchen table with the roll in my teeth and I did it badly.

**Twenty to seven.** I stood in the dining room in front of the sideboard for about four minutes.

I didn't open it.

I want to say that plainly. On the last day, standing in front of the drawer that had the answer in it, with all the time in the world, I did not open it, and there was no drama in the not-opening, there wasn't a struggle, I did not feel my hand go toward the handle. I stood there the way you stand in front of a bookshelf. And then I went and got my keys off the hook.

Off the hook. Where they live. Where they have always fucking lived.

**Seven.** I called Colleen in Naperville and talked to her for twenty minutes about her boy's hockey and a problem she was having with a neighbor's tree, and I said the right things in the right gaps, and at the end she said, "Sean, are you eating?" and I said, "Constantly," and she said, "You sound flat," and I said, "It's the phone," and she said, "Okay. Love you, dummy," and I said, "Love you," and hung up.

That's the last conversation I had with anybody in my family in the old way. I didn't know it. Nobody ever knows it. But if you'd told me, I wouldn't have changed a word of it, and I'd like credit for that, because it was a good one. A tree and some hockey. That's the right way to go out.

**Half past eight.** I drove down to the flats and parked on the service road and walked four hundred yards along a fence with the weeds dead and stiff with frost, and I went through the gate with the wrong padlock, and I stood in a steel headhouse with no windows, and six of us got into a cage, and a man up top pulled a lever.

Ninety seconds.

The square of orange sky got smaller like something being closed.

## 42. THE BELL

Fight fourteen.

He saw me from across the gallery and his face fell open.

That's the first thing. Before anything else, I want it recorded that Marek Sowinski, nineteen years old, standing in an orange room three hundred feet under Illinois with his hands already wrapped, looked across at the man he was fighting and understood in about a second and a half what had been done to him in a Dunkin' on Milwaukee Avenue twelve days earlier, and the look on his face was not anger.

It was *shame*. He was ashamed. He looked at the floor.

He came over. There were men between us and he came through them and he stood in front of me and he said, quietly, so nobody else could hear it:

"Sir — I didn't know it was you."

"I know."

"I can't —"

"You can."

"No, I'm gonna —" He was working very hard. Nineteen. "I'm gonna tell them I'm out. I'll pay them back the —"

And I leaned in, close to his ear, and I said the thing that I will be paying for after everything else in this book has been forgiven.

I said: "Marek. I asked for you. I picked you out. If you walk up that shaft I'll be down here next month with somebody worse, and he won't be any good, and he'll take four times as long, and that'll be on you too."

I let him stand there with that for a second and then I put my hand on the back of his neck like a man being kind and I said:

"Front two knuckles. Flat spot in front of the ear. You wrote it down."

The bell went.

**The first four minutes.** He wouldn't fight.

I mean it literally — he came out and he circled and he threw a jab at my shoulder, at my *shoulder*, deliberately wide, three or four times, and behind him the room started to make a noise, and the noise that a hundred and forty men make in a wet concrete tube when they think they're being cheated is not something you want directed at a nineteen-year-old.

So I hit him.

I want to be honest about this: I hit that boy in the mouth as hard as I have ever hit anything in my life. Right hand, bare, no give in it, straight through the wrist, and it went through his upper lip and put it onto his teeth and split it from the middle of the lip up into the nostril, so that afterward he had a flap and you could see his gum through his own face when he breathed.

I hit him to make him fight me. That's a thing I did.

He tasted it and something went across his eyes and the sweet kid from the doughnut shop stepped out of the way for the animal, which was the entire reason I'd chosen him.

**Minutes four to nine.** He put me on the wall.

He was two hundred and five pounds of nineteen and he walked me back across the wet floor like a man moving a wardrobe, and my shoulder blades went onto the concrete, and there was the seep coming down between my shirt and the wall, cold, running down into my waistband, which is a detail I'd forgotten about until just now.

And then he went to the brows, exactly the way I'd taught him, exactly.

Left brow first. Four short right hands from close, no windup, elbow tight, and on the third one it *parted* — that's the word, it doesn't split, there's no skin left to split, the scar just comes open along its length like a seam letting go — and I felt the heat go across and then the wet, and then the left side of the world shut down.

Right brow, second, and the superglue from the sixth of January made it worse, exactly as Denny said it would, because glue holds

the top edge fast so all the movement goes into the tissue underneath and it tears wider than a stitch line would. That one opened about two inches, from the outer end almost to the bridge, and it went so deep that afterward Vic said he could see the bone the whole length of it.

And that was it for seeing. Nine minutes in, both eyes gone under blood, and no rounds, so no wiping.

**Minutes nine to sixteen.** The blind stretch.

Here's what fighting blind is, when there is no bell coming and no corner and no one to stop it.

You hold your forearms up in a vee in front of your face and you keep your chin behind them and you *listen*. Not for sound — the room's a murmur, it's all one noise — for the small changes in weight against your arms. A man about to throw has to load, and loading moves his weight, and if any part of him is touching any part of you, you feel it a fraction before it happens. So you keep contact. That's the whole trade. Forearm against forearm, glove-less wrist against his elbow, staying in touch with him the way a blind man stays in touch with a wall.

He hit me between forty and fifty times in those seven minutes.

He hit the top of my head twice, ducking, and broke his own right hand. I heard it. And to his credit and to my everlasting sorrow he did not stop, he just started using the left, which is what I would have told him to do if I'd thought of it, and I hadn't, and he worked it out on his own, and I remember being *proud* of him.

Somewhere in there the nose went for the last time and this time it went with a different sound, softer, because there wasn't much bone left in it to break, it was mostly cartilage and old repairs, and after that I could not get air through it at all and I was breathing entirely through a mouth that was full of blood, which is a thing you can do for a surprisingly long time and which I do not recommend.

Somewhere in there he hit me on the left orbital rim, on the step, on the ledge that Ashkani said had set wrong, and it came apart along the old fracture, and I heard the crunch through the bone of my skull, and my left eye — which was already blind under blood —

dropped, physically, into the socket, so that when the swelling later went down enough for me to see out of it, everything on that side was about an inch lower than it should have been and did not line up with the other one, and never has since.

Somewhere in there something happened to my right ear. I don't know what. Vic says it was folded. The ear's not the same shape now, it's got a ridge across the top and a solid feel to it like a piece of shell, and Denny would have drained it, and Denny wasn't there.

And somewhere in there, at about minute fourteen, in the middle of all of it, standing blind against a wet wall with my arms up, taking a shot every eight or nine seconds from a nineteen-year-old with a broken hand, I felt a thing I have never told anybody and am telling you.

I felt *comfortable*.

Not brave. Not resigned. Comfortable, the way you are in a chair that fits. My head was completely empty. Not confused — *empty*, in the good way, in the 1988-boiler-room way. There was no house. There was no drawer. There was no inventory sheet folded in three. There was no chair with the sound down and no hedge and no small back bedroom I don't go in. There was a wall behind me and a boy in front of me and the problem of him, and that was the entire contents of the universe, and I want to tell you honestly that those were the best seven minutes I'd had since March of 2015.

That's what I was buying. Not just her.

*That.*

**Minute sixteen.** He put me down for the first time.

Left hook, blind side, on the hinge of the jaw. I went down in the way where you don't put your hands out, and my face went into the wet concrete, and I lay there in the black water with my cheek on it and I could taste the floor, that mineral wet-coin taste, mixed with mine.

The room went quiet, or quieter.

And I got up.

Nobody counts down there. There's no reason to get up down there except that you want to. I want you to sit with that. Every other time in my life that I've got up off a floor, there was a man over me counting, and a rule, and the whole architecture of the sport saying *here is your chance, take it or don't*. Down there it is just a man on the ground deciding, in front of a hundred and forty people, all on his own, with no clock, whether to stand back up into it.

I decided eleven times.

I'm going to say that once and not dress it up. Between minute sixteen and minute thirty-one, Marek Sowinski put me down eleven times and I got up eleven times.

The boy was crying by about the seventh. I know because I heard it in his breathing, close, in the clinch, that catch. He was hitting me and crying. Nineteen. And twice he said, "Stay down," in the clinch, right in my ear, quietly, a plea, and the second time he said "please," and I said — and this is the last coherent sentence I said as the man I used to be —

I said: "Sorry, kid. You're the only one still working."

### **Minute thirty-one.**

He hit me on the temple. Flat spot in front of the ear. Front two knuckles, straight through the wrist, left hand, because the right was broken.

Exactly where I told him. Exactly how.

And thirty-four years, and nineteen and four and one, and a boiler room on 106th Street, and a brown chair with a hostage in it, and eleven days of a boy called Fionn, and four hundred and eleven photographs, and a hedge taller than a window, and a drawer with a sheet of paper folded in three, all of it, everything, went out like a lightbulb.

The bell went.

And I was in the kitchen.

### 43. THE ACCURATE WOMAN

It was night.

That's the first thing that was wrong, and I knew it before I knew anything else, the way you know a wrong note before you know the tune. There was no gold coming in over the sink. The window over the sink was black and it had the room in it, doubled, the way a kitchen window does after dark, and the overhead was on — the ugly one, the ceiling fixture with the two bulbs and the dead moths in it that we said for four years we were going to replace.

The clock on the stove said 11:40.

And it was cold in there, actually cold, because the back door was open about a foot with the storm door shut behind it, which is what she did when she'd burned something, and there was that smell, scorched pan, and the extractor was running.

And she was in the doorway to the hall with a coat on.

Not the cardigan. A coat, buttoned, and boots, and her hair was *down*, and she had a canvas duffel over her shoulder, olive, and a hardshell case in her other hand, blue, twenty-six inches.

And she was thirty-eight and she was furious and she looked like herself.

I want to try to explain what that was like and I don't have the equipment. It's like this. Imagine you have looked at a photograph of somebody every day for a year and then you see the person. And the person's face *moves*. Everything in a photograph is a decision that got made once and stuck. A real face is making decisions constantly, forty a second, and every one of them is information, and you can't imagine that. You can't build that. It doesn't matter how good your workshop is.

She was making decisions with her face at me. She was doing the thing with her jaw. She was breathing hard through her nose because she'd been shouting and had stopped shouting about ninety seconds ago and was now at the part after shouting, which is worse, which is the part where the voice goes quiet and level and reasonable and she takes you apart with her hands in her pockets.

And she said:

"I'm not doing this anymore, Sean."

That's what she said. That's what she actually said, on the fourth of November, 2017, at twenty to twelve at night, in our kitchen, with the storm door shut and a burnt pan in the sink.

And then the rest of it came. All of it. In order. In her voice, at her speed, with the sentences going up in the middle, landing on me every time, and I'm going to put down what I've got and I'm not going to soften it, because there's no point to any of this if I soften it now.

She said: "Three years. Three years, and I have done every single thing they tell you to do. I got us into the group. I got us to Dr. Mahaffey. I made the appointments, I drove us there, I *paid* for it, I did all the talking in the room, and you sat there like a coat on a chair."

She said: "You didn't cry."

There it is. There it is, from a woman I have not been able to hear properly in six years, and I had it in a barn in October, in her mouth, thirty seconds of it, and I told myself it was my own guilt in a wig.

She said: "He was eleven days old and you didn't make a *sound*, and I thought, okay, that's shock, that's the man, he'll come round. And then it was a year. And then it was two. And in the second year I stopped grieving my son because I was too busy being married to a fucking piece of furniture."

She said: "Do you know what I do at work? Do you know what I actually do, all day, in the building where he died? I put my hands on people's chests and I keep them breathing. That's the job. And I come home to this house, and there's a man in a chair with the sound down, and I can't — Sean, I can't put my hands on *you*. There's nothing there to press on."

She said: "And the worst of it, the thing I can't get past, is that you're not even *sad*. If you were sad I'd have stayed. I'd have

stayed forever with a sad man. You're not sad. You're *gone*. You went out and you left the house running."

And I said something. I have this. I have my own voice in it and I'd give anything not to.

I said: "Where are you going to go?"

That's what I said. Not *don't*. Not *I'm sorry*. Not *I'll do anything*. My wife of four years stood in a doorway with two bags and told me she was leaving and I asked her about *logistics*.

And she laughed. Once. No humor in it at all.

She said: "Bernie's."

She said: "I'll come for the rest when you're at work."

And then she stopped, in the doorway, with the duffel on her shoulder, and something went across her face — and I have gone through this frame by frame ten thousand times and I still don't know what it was, whether it was one more chance or just the pause a person takes before a hard door — and she said, in a completely different voice, a small one:

"Sean. Say something."

And that's the shape of the woman I was married to. That's her. Right there, in one sentence, the whole of her: she comes at you with everything, she takes the roof off the room, she leaves you nothing to stand on — and then she stops in the doorway with her bags in her hands and gives you one more, because she can't help it, because she was the softest person I ever met underneath all that speed, and she was standing there at twenty to twelve at night waiting for me to open my mouth.

And I want to tell you what I said.

I want to tell you what I said more than I have ever wanted anything, and I'm going to have to tell you in the next chapter that I don't know, and I'd rather cut my hands off.

But before that, understand what had just happened to me. Understand what the room three hundred feet under Illinois had actually just handed me, at the cost of everything I own.

It was all a lie.

The kitchen with the four o'clock gold coming in over the sink. The blue cardigan with the pillowed elbows. The hair up in the elastic. The flowers with the ends cut on the diagonal. The little green mess on the counter. The laugh — that laugh, the head going back an inch, the best four minutes of my adult life —

*Sean, did you move my keys?*

There is no such afternoon.

I have looked for it since. I've been through all four hundred and eleven photographs and I've asked her sister and I've asked my own sister and there is no cardigan. She didn't own a blue cardigan. I have described that cardigan to two people who knew her for thirty-eight years and both of them said, gently, no.

It's an *assembly*. It's a kitchen from some other day and a light from some other year and a garment from God knows where and a woman built out of everything I needed her to be — soft, patient, unhurried, forgiving, standing at a counter in nice light, asking me about her keys.

Not angry. Never once angry.

Not leaving. Never once leaving.

I built her. I started building her in a funeral home on the ninth of November, 2017, and I worked on her for four years without knowing it, every day, quietly, the way the body lays down scar over something it can't fix — and then I took her down a hole in the ground eleven times and *finished* her.

And then on the fourteenth of January, 2023, a nineteen-year-old boy I trained myself hit me on the flat spot in front of the ear with his front two knuckles, and knocked the whole thing down, and underneath it, standing in a doorway at twenty to twelve at night with a bag on her shoulder, furious, breathing hard, alive —

there she was.

The real one. The accurate one. The last thing on this earth I wanted.

Truth. That's what the word means. *Asha*. She said it to me in a corridor with a coffee in her hand and I thought it was a nice thing about a religion.

It doesn't say anywhere that it's kind. It only says it's true.

#### **44. THE ELEVEN MINUTES**

The visit ended at *say something*.

Not faded. Ended. Like film running out.

I woke up eleven days later in a bed on the sixth floor at Christ with a tube in my nose, which is a hell of a place to wake up when your nose is the thing that's broken, and the first coherent thought I had in 2023 was that I needed to get back into that kitchen and find out what I said.

That's the whole of the rest of my life, that sentence. Everything from here is just the paperwork.

Let me set out what I know, because it's all I've got, and God knows I've had time.

**Known.** She was in the doorway with two bags at 11:40 p.m. The clock on the stove said it and I saw it and the stove clock ran four minutes fast, which I know because I set it, so call it 11:36 real.

**Known.** The crash was logged at 11:53 p.m. Bishop Ford northbound, wet road, no impairment, no braking, a single vehicle and a barrier. That's on the report in the manila envelope and it's the one number in this whole business that nobody made up.

**Known.** From my driveway on Baltimore Avenue to the point of impact is nine minutes at that hour. I have driven it. I have driven it more times than a sane man would. Nine minutes, at that hour, at the speed she drove, which was fast.

So: 11:36 in the doorway. 11:44 in the car, at the latest, to be dead at 11:53.

**Eight minutes.** Somewhere between eight and eleven minutes, depending on the stove clock and the traffic and how honest I'm being on any given day. Call it the eleven, because I've called it the eleven for two years now and I'm not changing it. It's got eleven

days of Fionn in it and eleven visits in it and eleven times I got up off a wet floor, and if there's one thing this whole account has taught me it's that a man will make anything mean anything.

**Eleven minutes** between my wife saying *Sean, say something* and my wife driving away from this house for the last time.

And I do not have them.

I want to be exact about the nature of the not-having, because it's not like forgetting where you put a thing. When you've forgotten something ordinary there's a *shape* to it, there's a hole with edges, you can feel around the rim of it and go *it was something to do with the garage*. This isn't that. Where those eleven minutes should be there is no rim. There's no edge to feel for. The tape says *say something* and then it says nothing, and it doesn't say nothing in a way that indicates something is missing. It's smooth.

And here's the thing that I have to live in now, so you might as well come in and have a look around:

**I had it once.**

That's the part. I had those eleven minutes. On the fifth of November, 2017, and on the sixth, and through that whole first winter, whatever happened in this kitchen between *say something* and the sound of her car was in my head like everything else, in pieces, on shelves, retrievable.

And I never went and got it.

For four years I did not open that drawer, and I did not open the *other* drawer, and I sat in a chair with the sound down and let a construction go up over the top of it like ivy over a wall. And then I took what was left of it down a shaft in the ground eleven times and ran it through the worst workshop a human being can build, and I came back up each time with a nice woman in a cardigan asking me about her keys.

It's gone. There is no copy. Ashkani said it and she was right and she was gentle about it and I've never forgiven her for either.

So here are the things I will not know until I die, and I'd like to list them, because listing them is the only operation I can still perform on them.

Did I follow her out?

Did I stand in the kitchen? Did I sit down? Did I put the television on? Is that what I did — is there a version where a woman puts two bags in a car in the dark while her husband watches a program?

Did I say something? I asked her where she was going. That was 11:38. In the eleven minutes did I find anything better? Did I get up out of it, finally, for one minute, at the very end, four years too late — did I say *don't*, did I say *I'm sorry*, did I say *I did love him*, *Nuala*, *I loved him*, *I just couldn't find where I'd put it* —

Did I put my hands on her?

I have to write that down because I think it every day. Not because there's evidence for it. Because there's no evidence against it, and after everything I've told you in this book about what I'm prepared to do to get what I want, I am not in a position to be certain about my own conduct in a room I can't remember being in.

And two things sit on the table and neither will move.

**The first is Mrs. Zabrocki.** Eighty-one, next door, up at all hours. She told the trooper — it's in the report, one line, *neighbor reports hearing storm door twice* — that she heard our storm door bang twice that night. Twice.

Twice means somebody went out and came back. Or somebody went out after somebody. Or she went out, and came back in for something, and went out again. Three readings and I have run them for two years and they will not resolve, and Mrs. Zabrocki died in 2020, and she was eighty-one, and she was watching a program with the sound up, and the trooper wrote one line.

**The second is the keys.**

Every visit. Every single one, all twelve — no, eleven, because the twelfth was the true one and the keys weren't in it at all. Eleven times out of eleven, that woman in the four o'clock light turned

around and asked me about her keys, and said they weren't on the hook.

Now. When I thought it was her, I thought it was nothing. It was the keys, it was our joke, it was the thing we said for four years, it was as ordinary as the coffee.

But it isn't her. I know that now. It's a construction, and I built it, and here's what I have learned about the things I build:

*Nothing in it is random.*

Every part of that kitchen came from somewhere. The light came from an afternoon. The counter came from a counter. Even the cardigan came from something, some garment on some woman on some day.

So the sentence came from somewhere too. That sentence — the only one that survived all eleven passes, the last thing standing in the rubble when everything else had gone down to an elastic and the word *hook* — that sentence was made out of something.

And I have to ask: what does a man do, at twenty to twelve at night, when his wife is standing in a doorway with two bags?

There's a hook by that back door. I put it up in 2014. Her keys lived on it and mine live on it and mine are on it right now, I can see them from where I'm sitting.

Did I take her keys off her?

Did I stand between my wife and the door with her keys in my fist for eleven minutes? Is that what it was? Is that the load-bearing thing at the bottom of it — did I hold her here, arguing, for eleven minutes, in a house she was trying to leave, and then give them back, and did she go out of here so angry, so *late*, so done with me, that she drove onto a wet expressway at eleven fifty at night and didn't brake?

Or is the hook just a hook, and the keys are just the keys, and my brain grabbed the nearest domestic object to build a sentence out of, the way it grabbed a cardigan?

Both of those are completely consistent with every fact available to me. Both of them will be completely consistent with every fact available to me on the day I die.

I destroyed the witness. That's what I did. I sat in a chair for four years and let the file rot and then I went down a hole eleven times and burned what was left, and the witness — the only one, the only human being on this earth who was in that kitchen and could tell me what kind of man I was in it —

was me.

And I'd like to tell you that this is unbearable, and that a man can't live inside it.

He can. That's the punchline. That's the actual, genuine punchline of the whole thing and I want it right here at the bottom of the worst chapter, because if I've done anything in this account I've been funny about it, and I'm not stopping now that it's got hard.

You'd think a hole like that in a man would kill him. It doesn't. It's just there. You get up, you have your eggs, you take your pills, you can't find the word for the flat fucking thing, you go to bed.

Guilt has a shape. Guilt you can carry, guilt has handles on it — men have carried guilt across whole continents, it's practically a piece of luggage.

This has no shape at all. There's nothing to pick up.

## **45. THE AFTERMATH**

Nobody writes this part down. They write the fight. The fight is nine pages and this is the next two years, and I've never once read an honest account of it, so here's mine, and I've kept it in days because days is how it comes.

**Day 0.** Somebody up top called it in from the service road, which took courage, because it ended the tunnel and everybody knew it would. Two men rode up in the cage holding me on the bar. A hundred and forty men went up that shaft six at a time in the dark before the ambulance got in past the gate and there is not one photograph of any of it and there never will be.

Bleeding on the brain. Two kinds — one fast, between the skull and the covering, which is the kind that kills you in an afternoon, and one slower underneath it. They opened my head on the left side to let the pressure off. There's a shaved patch that's never grown back right and a scar behind the ear that Colleen calls my zipper.

**Days 1-11.** Nothing. I wasn't there. Colleen was, the whole time, from Naperville, with her husband doing the kids. She slept in a chair for eleven days. She has never once made me feel bad about it, which is the cruelest thing she could have done.

**Day 11.** Awake. A tube in my nose, which as I've said is a design decision I'd like to raise with somebody.

I said — first words, according to Colleen, who wrote them down — “Am I in the building?”

Because I knew the ceiling. It's the building where he died. Same tiles.

**Day 14.** The face, first look. They don't like giving you a mirror and I made them.

Both eyes shut, so Colleen held the lids. Head shaved on one side with a line of staples in it. Nose gone to the left and flat and packed. Both brows closed with something that looked like fishing line, and the right one done in two sections because there was a piece missing — *missing*, gone, not there, and they'd pulled the two ends together, so my right eyebrow now stops for about a centimeter in the middle. It looks like a road with a bridge out.

The left eye sitting low in the socket, and it has stayed low. The right cheek flat from May. The mouth not symmetrical anymore — the left corner doesn't come up as far as the right, so my smile now goes on at half speed on one side and I look, in photographs, permanently sarcastic.

Which, in fairness.

I looked at it for a good while and I said: “Well. There goes the modeling.”

Colleen laughed and then went out into the corridor for ten minutes, which is what people do around me now, and I have learned not to comment on it.

**Day 21.** Home to Naperville, not Hegewisch, because I couldn't be alone and there was no argument about it and I didn't have one in me.

**Days 21-60.** Here's what those weeks are, physically.

You sleep fourteen hours and wake up tired. Not sleepy. *Tired*, in the arms and the chest, like the tiredness after a funeral.

Light hurts. Not metaphorically. Sunlight through a window is a physical event and you go and sit in the room at the back with the blind down and everybody thinks you're depressed and you're not, you're *hiding from a lamp*.

Noise is worse. Two people talking at once is not two conversations, it's a *substance*, and it fills your head up and you have to leave the room. Colleen's kids are nine and thirteen and I love them and for two months I could not be in a kitchen with both of them.

Balance. You get up off a sofa and the room takes a second and a half to catch up, and in that second and a half you are a man on the deck of a boat, and nine times in those weeks I went down. The last one I broke a lamp and my niece cried and I said "the lamp started it," which she did not find funny and which I still maintain was good.

The headache. Behind the left eye, all day, every day, with the metal taste in it. It has never gone. It's there now.

**Day 40.** The first real inventory of what didn't come back.

**Words.** Nouns, mostly. Ordinary ones. I lose four or five a day and they're not hard words, they're *spatula* words. There's a specific horror to standing in a room holding an object and knowing you know its name and not being able to get at it, and the horror wears off. That's what nobody tells you. It wears off, and then it's just a thing you do, like limping.

**Sequence.** I cannot hold a sequence. Recipes are gone. Instructions are gone. A man on the phone says “go to the website, click the third tab, enter the number from the top of the letter” and by *tab* I have lost the website. I keep everything on paper now, in lists, in a spiral notebook, and if I lose the notebook I lose the week.

**Time.** No sense of elapsed anything. I’ll sit down and get up and it’s been forty minutes or four. I set alarms to eat.

**Faces.** Not people — *faces*. I know Colleen’s voice instantly and I have twice failed to recognize her in a doorway. It comes back after a second. It’s a second I could do without.

**The temper.** This is the one nobody warns the family about and it’s the one that costs you. It’s not that I got angry. It’s that the gap between the thing happening and me being enormously, violently angry about it went from about four seconds to zero. There’s no runway. I went off at a supermarket cashier in March 2023 over a coupon and I heard myself from a long way away and I could not get back to the controls in time, and I went out to the parking lot and sat in the truck and cried, over a coupon, in a lot in Naperville.

I have since put a rubber band on the notebook and when I feel the zero I go outside. It works about seventy percent. Seventy percent is not a good number in the business of speaking to human beings, but it’s what’s on offer.

**What came back.** Reading, mostly. Music, entirely — music is the one thing that works better than it did, which nobody has explained to me. Driving, eventually, and I take back roads.

And the mouth.

That’s the thing. That’s the part I want to put down because it surprised me more than any of it. Every single one of the higher functions came back damaged or didn’t come back — the words, the sequence, the time, the temper, the face of my own sister in a doorway —

and the whole apparatus for taking the piss came through without a scratch.

I can't remember whether I've eaten. I can tell you, instantly, unerringly, at speed, that the resident who did my brows in September had a jaw like a man defusing something. I couldn't get *spatula* for six minutes and I got *the lamp started it* in under half a second with a broken head, lying on the floor of my sister's front room.

Ashkani says it's real, that it's one of the deepest things there is, that it's older and lower down than the parts that fell over. I don't know. What I know is that I lost my wife twice, and my son, and my face, and my words, and eleven minutes of the fourth of November 2017, and the last man standing in the building is the one who does the jokes.

Which is either a mercy or a joke in itself, and I've never been able to tell, and if you knew who was asking you'd know why that's funny.

**Day 61.** Denny Fewster came to my sister's house in Naperville on the twenty-second of March, 2023, seven months to the day since he stood on my step in a windbreaker and wouldn't come past the door.

He came in. Straight past me, into the kitchen, put a bag on the counter.

He'd brought a pie. Sixty-seven years old, drove out to Naperville from South Deering with a pie.

He looked at my face for a long time.

"Well," he said, "you look like a thumb."

"With a face drawn on it," I said.

"With a face drawn on it," he said. "Yeah."

And then Denny Fewster sat down at my sister's kitchen table and put his hands flat on it and cried, which I had not seen him do at Marge's funeral and did not see him do at any point in thirty-four years, and I sat there with my head shaved on one side and my eyebrow with the bridge out and I could not do it with him.

Still can't. That's a thing I should probably tell you before we finish.

I have cried three times since 2015.

A dirt floor in a barn in Will County in July, when the supply ran short.

A coupon, in a parking lot in Naperville.

And once on Cicero Avenue in December of 2021, at a jingle for a mattress place, so hard I had to pull the truck over — and I have called that laughing for four years, in this account and everywhere else, and I sat down last month and worked out that I don't actually know which one it was.

Not once for either of them, though.

Not for her and not for him.

#### **46. ASHA**

Parvaneh Ashkani sees me twice a year and has done since 2023, and she has never once said *I told you*, which given the circumstances is a feat of self-control I regard as roughly athletic.

The last time was in June. Parking structure out the window, same bird on the shelf, daughters a bit older in the photograph.

"You've lost weight," she said.

"I've lost a lot of things. The weight's the least of it."

"How's the notebook?"

"The notebook's fine. The notebook is a stunning success. My problem is remembering that there's a notebook."

She wrote something down. I watched her do it and I thought: at some point somebody's going to read that file and it's going to be a hell of a read.

**What's left.** She went through it and I'll give it to you the way she gave it to me, which is straight, because I asked her a long time ago to stop cushioning and she stopped, and it's the only relationship in my life that has actually improved.

The bleeds are done and the pressure's fine. The skull is the skull. The face is the face and there's a surgeon who could do something

about the rim and the cheek and I'm not going to, because I've had enough of buildings.

The headache is permanent. The taste with it is permanent, and no, they don't know why it has a taste.

The words, the sequence, the time and the temper are not going to get much better than they got by the end of the first year, which is where they are.

And underneath all of that, running quietly, there's the other thing, the umbrella ribs coming loose and clumping and spreading, cell to cell, outward from the folds where the vessels run. Which cannot be seen in a living man. Which will be there in twenty years and will be more of it than there is now.

"So what does that look like," I said. "In ten years. Fifteen."

"I don't know," she said. "Nobody does. Anybody who tells you a timeline is selling something. What I can tell you is that in men with your exposure the things that most often go first are the temper, the judgment, the impulse control, and the mood. The parts that stop you doing things." She put the pen down. "The parts that were already, in your case, historically underfunded."

"That's a joke."

"It's a very small one. I've been saving it since 2022."

"It was worth the wait."

"It really wasn't."

**What's coming.** Then she said the part I want on the page.

"Sean. I want to say one thing about the visits, because you're going to be an old man someday and you'll still be asking, so let's do it now while I'm here to answer.

"Do I think you saw your wife? No. I think a damaged brain produced experiences that felt more real than reality, because that's what damaged brains do, and I think the content of them was assembled out of what you needed. That's my professional opinion and I'll put it in writing.

"But I want to be honest with you about the limits of it, because you've been lied to enough, mostly by yourself. I can't test it. There's no instrument. I wasn't in there. Nobody has ever been in there but you, and the *you* who was in there has been altered so many times that he isn't available for questioning." She sat back. "So what I actually think is: probably a construction. And I have to live with *probably*, and so do you, and I've noticed over thirty years that people find *probably* much harder than *no*."

"And the last one," I said. "The true one."

"That's the part I can't do anything with," she said. "Because that one's *checkable*, isn't it. The bags were in the car. That's on a police form. So the twelfth one lines up with the world, and the other eleven don't." She looked at me. "Which is either your brain finally coughing up the truth, or it's your brain building the version that matched the paperwork you'd read in a drawer in April."

"That's the same problem again."

"It's the same problem again," she said. "It's the only problem you've got, and it doesn't have an answer, and I'd rather you heard that from me than got it off the internet at two in the morning."

### **The last thing.**

At the end I said: "Doc. That story. The father and the son and the medicine that comes late."

"Rostam and Sohrab."

"I've thought about it a lot."

"So has everybody for a thousand years."

"I had it wrong," I said. "In September, in the corridor. I drove home thinking it was about the king. About being late. About the medicine sitting in a room while somebody dies."

"And now?"

"Now I think the boy asked him three times who he was. And every time, he could have said. And he didn't say, because he had a good reason, because he was being careful, because it was tactically sound." I had to stop and go around a word I couldn't get and come

back at it from the other side, which is how I talk now, and she waited, which she always does. "He wasn't late. He *had* it. He had the whole thing in his hand at the start and he chose the other one, and everything after that was just the two days it took."

Parvaneh Ashkani sat there for a while.

"My grandmother," she said, "would have said that's the only reading. She'd have said the medicine business is for children, so they've got something to cry about at the end."

"What would you say?"

"I'd say she was a very hard woman and I miss her every day."

She stood up and shook my hand, which she does, which nobody in a hospital does.

"Six months," she said.

"I'll write it in the notebook."

"Write it in the notebook."

## **47. ON THE HOOK**

I moved back to Baltimore Avenue in the spring of 2024, over Colleen's objection, which she registered in writing, which she is a lawyer's wife and does.

Here's the house now.

I use six rooms. That's not nothing. Six out of eleven, up from four, which took two years and is the closest thing to progress in this entire account.

I cut the hedge. Took me nine days, at forty minutes a day, because forty minutes is what I've got before the noise of the trimmer puts me in a dark room with a blind down, and because I can't hold a sequence, so I did it in a spiral pattern with no plan and it came out looking like something an animal did. A man came past on the second day and said, "About time," and I said, "It's not finished," and he said, "It's not started," and I laughed so hard I had to go inside.

I go in the back bedroom now. There's nothing in there. That's the thing I'd been walking past for nine years — an empty room with a rocking chair in it and a shade on the window and eleven days' worth of nothing. I go in about once a month and stand there and don't feel anything at all, which is exactly what I've always been afraid of, and it turns out that once you've actually gone in and confirmed it, it costs about eight dollars a month instead of everything you own.

The tooth is in the drawer with the paperwork. So is the inventory sheet, but the inventory sheet is also on the refrigerator, unfolded, held on with a magnet from a pizza place, because I found out what my own head does to a piece of paper it doesn't like and I am not giving it the chance again. I read it every morning while the eggs go. *One (1) suitcase, hardshell, blue. One (1) duffel bag, canvas, olive. One (1) box, cardboard, containing books and framed photographs.*

That's my liturgy. That's what I've got instead of a prayer.

I don't know what happened to Marek Sowinski. He came to Naperville once, in April of 2023, and stood in my sister's kitchen with a broken hand still in a splint, nineteen years old, and I told him the only true thing I had, which was: *You weren't in a fight. You were an instrument, and I picked you up off a sidewalk, and none of it was yours.* And he said, "That's not how it works, though, is it," which is the most intelligent thing anybody has said to me in this whole business, and then he went out to his car.

I have made two attempts to find out what became of him and I stopped both times, and I'd like to tell you that was decency, and I think it was more likely the other thing.

The tunnel's shut. That specific room, anyway. Whoever it was that called it in from the service road, they came and welded the headhouse door and put a real padlock on the gate, and I have no doubt at all that within a year there was another room somewhere under this city with a bell in it, because there always is, because the demand is not for a room.

Denny comes Sundays. We watch fights on television and he tells me what's wrong with everybody and I agree with him and neither of us has ever mentioned the twenty-second of August 2022, and we've got maybe six or eight years of Sundays left between us at the current rate, and I'd trade a great deal of what I've told you in this book to keep them.

Colleen calls Wednesdays. I sound flat. It's the phone.

And here's what I actually do, if you want the honest picture, rather than the tidy one.

I lie on that couch some nights and I try to make it happen.

Not the fighting. That's done — not because I found God or grew up, but because the mechanism is broken, because the room I'd need is welded shut and because I couldn't take a punch now without dying, and I want to be very clear that those are the reasons. It's not virtue. It was never going to be virtue. It ran out.

But I lie there and I try to get back into that kitchen. The night one. The real one. Eleven forty at night with the overhead on and the moths in it and the storm door shut and the pan burnt in the sink and my wife in the doorway with a bag on her shoulder saying *Sean, say something*.

And I go at it from every angle I've got left, and what I get is the same eleven seconds of an elastic and the word *hook*, and then smooth nothing where the rest of my life should be.

She doesn't come. Neither of them does. Not the accurate one and not the one in the cardigan.

That's the thing about the whole arrangement that I think I'd want somebody to know, if any of this was ever going to be any use to anybody, which it isn't.

I paid everything. Every single thing I had. Twenty-two months, fourteen fights, a face, a skull, a vocabulary, my sense of time, my sister's peace of mind, a nineteen-year-old boy's whole idea of himself, and the last copy in existence of a woman called Nuala Deane, who was funny, who was fast, who was mean as a snake and

softer than anybody I ever met, who could take the roof off a room  
—

and what I bought with it was eleven seconds of a hair elastic and the certain knowledge that I will never find out what kind of man I was in my own kitchen for eleven minutes on the fourth of November, 2017.

That's the deal. That's the whole exchange rate, finally, in writing, after two years of arithmetic.

So I did the only thing left that I could do.

I took the plastic bag out of the drawer — the sealed one, with the case number on it in ballpoint — and I cut it open with scissors, and I took out her keys.

House key, car key, a key to her mother's place that hasn't fit anything since 2016, a little enamel thing off a keyring from Galway.

And I put them on the hook by the back door.

They're there now. I can see them from the couch when the kitchen light's on.

I don't know why she said it. Eleven times, in eleven rooms, in eleven wrecked versions of my head, in a barn and a scrap yard and a truck bay and a room three hundred feet under this city: *Sean, did you move my keys? They're not on the hook.*

I built that sentence out of something. There's no random in it. Something happened in that kitchen and it went into the concrete of the thing I made, and I have no way in and no way of ever finding out and I am not going to know, and Mrs. Zabrocki heard the storm door go twice, and she's dead, and the trooper wrote one line.

But they're on the hook now.

Whatever it was. Whatever I did or didn't do.

They're on the hook, love. They've been on the hook the whole time.

## GLOSSARY

**asha** ah-SHAH — Avestan, *truth, the true order*. In the Zoroastrian scheme, what is actually the case — and the side of it a life is asked to stand on. As the book has it: it does not say anywhere that it is kind, only that it is true.

**druj** DROOJ — Avestan, *the Lie*. Not the telling of a lie, but the thing that runs the wrong way underneath the world and looks completely convincing.

**Shahnameh** shah-nah-MEH — Persian, *the book of kings*. Ferdowsi's thousand-year-old epic of the Persian kings and heroes, in which Rostam kills a boy on the second day and finds the armband on his arm afterwards.

Sean Vardy is forty-four, four years widowed,  
and fighting on the unlicensed circuit in  
banquet halls and truck bays on the  
industrial edge of Chicago.

After a knockdown in a VFW hall in Cicero  
he gets four minutes that the medical literature  
has a flat clinical name for and that he calls,  
privately, a visit. His wife is at the counter  
in their kitchen in Hegewisch, in the light  
that comes in over the sink at four o'clock  
in the fall, asking him whether he has moved  
her keys. Not remembered. Present.  
Breathing. Saying his name.

He starts taking fights to get it back, and  
the threshold rises, because it always rises.  
Nine seconds and one punch becomes a  
barn in Will County, a scrap yard at four in  
the morning, and finally a room three  
hundred feet beneath the city where there  
are no rounds, no referee, and one bell to  
start and one bell when a man does  
not get up.

He knows the exchange rate.  
He has calculated it the way  
an addict calculates. What  
he does not know is  
what the currency is.

*"Every recall is  
a rewrite.  
Every single one.  
There is no way to  
look at a memory  
without changing it."*



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