

WHOLE

DEREK UPDEGRAFF

W H O L E

A NOVEL

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B O O K S

WHOLE

A Novel

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For Elizabeth

I

A Person and His Angel

ONCE IT HAPPENED that a person could see his angel. At first it was odd for the person, but he grew to love the praise he received for doing basic things. When the person poured his coffee, the angel smiled and gave him a thumbs-up, as if to say, Perfect pour, even though he'd actually spilled a little. And when the person rinsed out his mug and set it upside-down on the drying rack, he looked to his angel for recognition, and sure enough his angel shot over another smile and thumbs-up combo, suggesting that in the history of this world not many maneuvers had been performed with comparable grace. And so it went. Driving steadily to work. Sitting upright in his chair like a good person. Smiling to others. Working diligently, whether with computer or pen or phone or just in his mind. Talking to others without a bicker, with zero hint of *Oh, I envy you*. Reading the newspaper while on break or at home. Relieving himself at work or at home. Sitting on the couch just right. Chewing his food just right. These accomplishments prompted thumbs-up after thumbs-up, head-nod after head-nod, smile and smile and smile and smile. While sleeping, the person would sometimes wake, and he'd squint until he could see the angel alert in his chair. And there was the double thumbs-up with encouraging nod. Really amazing job sleeping, he'd gesture. The best, the best I've seen, he'd gesture. And then, as he always did, the person would whisper to himself, "I'm so very good at living. I'm so very good at living."

1

I HIT A HOMELESS MAN today. First day of spring, which is supposed to be about rejuvenation and coupling up. You know, the reverdie tradition, except out here in the desert. So it's the first morning of spring, and I hit a homeless man. Rammed right into the back of his bike. It's a miracle he's alive, Ronnie, the homeless guy I hit, since my car mangled his bike after he'd been thrown to the pavement.

When the accident happened, I'd been looking at a text from Ashley. Normally I glance at a text and get my eyes back on the road. But she texted, *We have something to talk about tonight*. And I was staring at it and trying to get what she meant. Was this good? Was this bad? It was cryptic, to be sure, and I couldn't help but feel like I was in for it, like it wasn't going to be a good night for us.

So I was driving down Mission Boulevard in Jurupa Valley, and when I got on the bridge that leads to Riverside I was staring at that text, and then I felt the car smack into something, and the whole thing lasted a few seconds, maybe just one second, I don't know, it was a flash, just a flash of a moment. My car smacked something hard, and I looked up and hit my brakes, but before the car stopped, before my foot had even reacted and started to push down on the brake pedal, I looked up and saw this guy half on a bike and half in the air, sideways leaning, holding onto a puffed-up trash bag, and he flew off to the right, the trash bag with him, and then the man and bag smacked against the pavement and soda cans flew everywhere and the bike went under my car and there was the sound of metal scraping. And my tires were locked and screeching then when the car had just trampled the bike, and in the moment when the metal bike was being crushed I felt the scraping in my gut, and then when my car finally stopped I hopped out to see what all had happened.

My car was stopped there on the bridge, and I was running around to the other side, and I saw the crushed bike behind my car, and there were cans

everywhere, and then I saw Ronnie, the homeless guy, on all fours trying to pick up the cans that fell out of his trash bag.

“Are you okay?” I said to him. “Forget about the cans. Are you okay?” And I knelt down because he was ignoring me and was just all about those loose cans.

And then I patted him on the back, and he said, “Help me, dipshit. Get those goddamn cans over there.”

A few good Samaritans stopped and helped us. We gathered his cans up and moved his mangled bike to the side of the road, and I moved my car off to the side to ease up traffic, and someone had called an ambulance and it didn’t take long for that thing to come racing in on the scene.

After the blur of the accident had passed, along with the can gathering and all the onlookers moving on, Ronnie sat on the side of the road while a paramedic looked him over, and I was the only one left from the initial crowd after the good Samaritans got back in their cars and moved on. And I fessed up to it. I let everyone know that I was the guy who hit him and that I’d stick around.

One of Ronnie’s elbows was all swollen, and his ribs were bruised pretty badly. He had a helmet on—which surprised me, a homeless guy wearing a helmet—but that meant it could have been a lot worse for him. That styrofoam on the inside of the helmet was cracked from the impact.

I let the paramedics take down my info. I gave them all the right numbers, the right address, and so on.

Ronnie said, “Don’t worry, man. I’m not going to sue you.” He said, “Don’t worry, man. I’ve got insurance.”

And I said, “I’d like to pay for whatever bills there are.” And I found out what hospital they were taking him to.

But Ronnie said, “My name’s Ronnie, man.” And that was when I learned his name. And then he said, “I’m a vet, man. I’ve got insurance, man. Free ambulance rides. Maybe five a year. And when I get there, I’ll just go again. I’ll just do the minimum, man, and then I’ll just go again.”

I said, “Let me give you my number.”

“I’ve got a cell phone, man,” he said.

“Good,” I said. “Let me give you my number, and you call me if I owe you anything.”

“You owe me a bike.”

“I’ll buy you a new bike,” I said.

“Really?” he said. “That’s nice of you. That’s nice of you. But I guess you did hit me first, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure,” I said.

The paramedics said they needed to take him to the hospital then. They’d bandaged that swollen elbow, but they said they had to take him in just to make sure there wasn’t any internal damage.

Then Ronnie said, “Take my bike and cans down to my camp.”

“The wrecked bike?”

“It’s good for parts. You owe me. Take it down to my camp. And my cans. Walk down the dirt trail on that side. Walk down for a while till you see that tree over there. See it?”

“Yeah.”

“Turn in there and walk down the hill. Then keep walking up more but stay near the side and then you’ll see an orange tent. Henry’s on a rope, okay. Henry’s on a rope so don’t get close. He’ll fuck you up, man. When you see the tent, just set the bike and cans down. Just set them down and I’ll find them later. Don’t you go walking to my tent, man. Henry will fuck you up, man.”

“I’ll just set them down. Henry’s your dog?”

“Of course, man. No, he’s my wife! What’s wrong with you, man? Of course he’s my dog.”

“Okay,” I said, and I was nervous about the damn dog but not even sure yet if I was going to bother walking over there at all.

“And meet me here tomorrow morning. Not here but over there.”

He pointed to a fenced-in park at the base of the backside of Mt. Rubidoux.

“That’s a dog park. Saturday and Sunday mornings I meet my buddy Ace over there. I’ll be there after the sun’s up, okay? You pick me up there. Maybe six or seven or eight.”

“I’ll be there at eight,” I said.

The ambulance took off with him, and I picked up his crumpled bike and sack of cans. I followed the dirt path where he’d pointed and got to the tree he was talking about, and then I hesitated.

He’s on a rope, I told myself. He’s on a rope. So I walked down the slope and entered the dry riverbed. I walked slowly. I crept. I was thief-like in my approach even though I was dropping off someone’s stuff and not after anything. In a little bit, I saw the orange tent, and it was still far away and I wasn’t getting any closer. It was a dark faded orange. A burnt orange. And around the tent, there were piles of things. Maybe some crates. Maybe some jugs of water. I couldn’t tell from the distance. I set the bike and cans down close to the slope’s edge like he’d asked. I wasn’t about to go walking up to some guard dog at that moment.

And then I just scampered out of there, made it back to my car as quickly as I could, and then realized that it was getting warm and that I was sweating, but luckily I keep an extra deodorant in my glove box, and then I put some on, cranked the AC, and restarted my drive to work.



In my car, I started thinking about the last time I rode a bike, but I couldn't pinpoint it. It had been several years. And then I started thinking about my friend Carlos from elementary school because we would always ride bikes together in the street.

And then I got to thinking about this one time in third grade when Carlos and I wrote and performed a play for his grandma and her friends. We spent hours on the script, hours on the costumes and cardboard backdrops. Then we lugged everything out to his grandma's living room, set it all up. Five old ladies sat on the couch and two wingback chairs. They smacked their lips, drank their tea. One of them pulled a lipstick out of her purse. She puckered and applied. She offered the stick to her neighbor, who took it and applied it, too.

And now you might be thinking, Joe, why is this important? You were just going on about hitting a homeless guy and you haven't even brought in Ashley yet.

So I'll tell you now in case you're wondering. It's all important. All this stuff matters. What I'm telling you is: that lipstick was cherry red. I remember its brightness. Now I might compare the color to an unhappy man's red sports car. I might be tempted to call it Ferrari red, or racing red, since I feel middle-aged, but that stage is still years away since I'm not even thirty, except that we don't know when we're going to die, so maybe I passed my midlife a while back. But it's not Ferrari red because that's a rich man's compensation, and I'm too happy to be unhappy. What I'm saying is: my third grade friend's grandma and her troop passed around a cherry red lipstick. They passed it around like schoolgirls. They passed it around like a joint, but of course, I wasn't thinking that at the time. But now I can imagine them as young women when I couldn't then, their lives brimming with the triumphs and disappointments that brought them to that couch and those wingback chairs, taking comfort in each other and their tea and that cherry lipstick. And you need to know that they applied it carefully, like they were going to the theater, and then they slurped from their cups and waited for the day's entertainment.

This was my first time in a play. I took it very seriously. The play was called *Companion*. We each played an animal you wouldn't expect to be friends with

the other. He was a peacock because there were tons of feather boas in the trunk at the foot of his grandma's bed. He stripped down to his undies, and I wrapped the blue boas around his waist, around his chest and arms. Then we took wire hangers and bent them straight, except for the hooks, which we attached to a belt he put on. About twenty metal wires shot out from his back down to the carpet, and I wrapped the green and yellow and turquoise boas up and down those bent hangers. He put on black eyeliner and one of his grandma's blue hats. He looked spectacular. And I don't know where he is now, but I like to think he's here in the world doing spectacular things.

I was a dog. I know, I know. You're thinking, Too boring, Joe. Or, What kind of dog, at least? But neither of us had a dog, so we didn't know breed names, and our thinking was: A) a dog would chase a peacock, so it satisfied the requirement of being a surprising friend, and B) if one animal was wild and extravagant, the second should be mild, reserved.

So I put on his grandma's tan sweatsuit, and we cut out floppy ears from construction paper and taped them to a hat. He wanted to use eyeliner to color my nose black and kind of give me an upward dog smile, but I told him I didn't like other people touching my face, or touching me in general, and he respected that and said, "Ok, just smile the whole time. And maybe pant sometimes when it's not your turn to talk."

And I said, "Sure." And we put on bathrobes to disguise our costumes while we set up the first cardboard backdrop. The first act took place in a school lunchroom. On the cardboard behind us, we'd drawn rows of tables with kids and animals sitting and eating. The living room rug was our stage. We brought out a card table and two folding chairs, then slipped into the hallway and removed our robes. From the wing, we said together, "A play called *Companion* will begin in thirty seconds." His grandma and her friends applauded. Then a hush fell over the living room, and my friend came out in his peacock garb and sat sideways in a chair. This allowed his wire-hanger/feather-boa rail to flow behind him without getting messed up, and it allowed him to face the audience so that he could explain to them that he'd tried to sit at a table with other kids and animals but that they'd all told him to go away. They'd said he was funny-looking and a weirdo and that he smelled bad. Then he explained that it was the first day of school and that he was scared and nervous. I think he talked a bit about where he was from and what brought him to the area. Then he turned his head to face the table, picked up an imaginary sandwich, and chewed the air in an overexaggerated manner. My cue was to come out on the fifth bite. He chewed slowly between each bite, really milking the sadness of the situation. He

sighed a lot, too. Then at last I came out and explained that I'd been sitting at a nearby table and that I'd witnessed others being mean to him. I said that I didn't like the table I was sitting at because the animals there were swearing a lot. And then I said, "I told myself to be courageous, so I stood." That's verbatim. You know the way some phrases from your past just stick. I wrote the first part, and he added the last bit. And then we looked at each other like, Wow, we really are a couple of genius playwrights. Though I doubt we knew that word yet.

So then, of course, my doggie-self joined him at the table, and we talked and fake-ate food and agreed to be best friends, and then we got up and announced that it was time to go back to class. The second act doesn't need as much of a recap. We switched out the cardboard backdrops. The new setting was outside of the school, so we'd drawn sidewalks and a road and some cars and the school in the background. Basically, I was walking home and I was distraught because I couldn't find my new peacock best friend anywhere. And I carelessly stepped out into the street, definitely not looking left, then right, then left as we'd been taught, and just when I was about to get run over by a speeding car, my new friend rushed over to me and pulled me back to safety. He clutched me in his arms and explained how he'd just saved me from a reckless driver. His grandma and her friends gasped. His heart knocked against my chest as he held me.

The third act took place in a candy shop. It was the same day. These cardboard backdrops had old-timey countertops and jars of candy everywhere. I don't think either of us had been in a store that was only a candy store, but we'd seen them in movies. We also weren't allowed to walk home after school, but I digress. So after my near-death experience, I said I wanted to buy my new friend a gumball from the candy shop down the street. You know, to thank him for saving me. And he said he wanted to do the same. He said something like, "You know, you saved me, too. Earlier at lunch. You saved me, too."

In the candy shop, my doggie-self picked out a blue gumball for him, and his peacock-self picked out a yellow gumball for me. And these were real props. He had a couple left from his stash, and he wanted to use them for this performance. So we talked for a while in the store, and then we purchased the gumballs with imaginary money, and I popped the yellow one in my mouth, and I bit down on it and chewed. And he popped the blue one in his mouth, but then he gargled and coughed and dropped to his knees, hitting the rug hard, then fell forward onto his chest and shook his legs and arms and then stilled.

I rushed to his side and flipped him over. His grandma flew to the ground and shoved a finger in his mouth and was hooking around. We thought he'd

died. But he whispered, “Grandma, Joe, it’s fine. This is part of the show.” And he rose, and he escorted his grandma back to the couch, and he spit the gumball into his hand, then raised it above his head, pinching it between his thumb and finger to show the audience, and then he looked at me and then back at our audience, and then he gave a monologue as the ghost of the peacock, and I slid to the side, an unknowing viewer now, too, and he talked about the merits of being kind in all moments because you never know which day might be your last, and he talked about how all things are short-lived—joy, pain, pleasure, heartbreak—and those weren’t his exact words, but he went on for a while, and then he concluded his speech by standing on the brick fireplace and shouting, “Nothing matters in the world except kindness!”

His grandma and her friends went wild with applause. They stood. They cheered. I think I was even clapping. And then my friend gestured for me to move back to center stage with him, and we held hands and bowed together. Bowing again and again and again and again while the ladies who were once vibrant young women cheered our tenderness and ambition while wearing their cherry lipstick.

Later we rode our BMX bikes until our moms picked us up. While we were riding, I was mad at him, but I never told him. I was thinking, How could you abandon the story we’d planned to tell? I didn’t think it was fair that we agreed to have equal parts, but then he ended up shining at the end. But mostly I was upset that the thing I was positive would happen didn’t. You know? And you’re thinking, Okay, okay. Life lessons. Big deal. People are unpredictable. But you need to know these details: he was popping wheelies on his bike. He was smiling. He was beaming while the air blew through his hair. And I tried to stay on his tail, following his moves, murmuring, “We were supposed to eat gumballs together and be happy.”



I parked my car in the lot behind my work, entered through the café’s back entrance, and told my boss I was late today because I hit some homeless guy with my car.

And work was work. I lasted my shift and then put in an hour of overtime since we’d gotten new crates of vegetables—red onions, avocados, Batavia lettuce, and so on—and they needed washing, then storing or slicing. My boss wasn’t too mad that I’d clocked in an hour late because it was a pretty slow Friday. The place is called Empire Café, which isn’t a very good name if you ask me, but the boss chose it because we’re all living in what’s called the Inland

Empire—Riverside but also San Bernardino, Corona, Jurupa Valley where I live, and the other southern California cities out here an hour east of Los Angeles, everything that presses up against the mountains, all this land out here where the summers roast you from May to October, six months of heat almost always in the nineties at least.

But so that's what he named it, Empire Café, and I mostly make sandwiches there though sometimes I get stuck making drinks too. But I mostly make sandwiches because I'm really particular about things. I arrange the veggies just so. I roll up sliced meat like tight cigars. I'm just good at it. So one day when the boss saw my work he said, "All right, here's our new sandwich guy," and kicked this guy Larry back onto the espresso machine.

After work, I drove home and got there around 6:00 p.m. The café's in downtown Riverside, so I drove back over the bridge to get into Jurupa Valley—I have an apartment out there because the rent is cheaper—and for most of the day I'd forgotten that I'd hit that homeless guy Ronnie. I mean I didn't forget. I just wasn't actively thinking about it. But when I had to drive over the bridge again, of course I thought about it, and my body even reacted to it. Like I shivered recalling the crunch of the bike under my car and was relieved that I didn't run him over. And I thought about stopping to see if he'd found his wrecked bike and cans, but then I remembered that I said I'd meet him in the morning to buy him a new bike, and I had a date with Ashley I needed to shower for, so I just kept heading home.

At about eight, I met up with Ashley at this restaurant called The Salted Pig. "Now that's a name," I said, "The Salted Pig. Much better than Empire Café."

"You should start your own café one day," she said. "You could have bookshelves everywhere. A take-a-book-leave-a-book kind of deal. Host literary events. Have authors read their poems and stories."

Ashley's a professor and a poet. Even though she's so young to have that job. I mean the professor part. Most poets are young—kids, teenagers, right? Like all kids are artists. And then in adulthood, in terms of the population, so very few people are artists or poets in their thirties, forties, et cetera. But I was saying that Ashley is young to be a professor. Twenty-eight, exactly my age. And I mean *exactly* my age. How do I know this? On our first date, she was carded, and I saw her birthday when she held up her license for the waiter to see. And there it was: 04/23/1988. And maybe I wouldn't have even noticed if it was any date other than my own. And the waiter didn't card me, and I didn't comment on us sharing a birthday. I don't know why. Maybe I thought she'd be turned off by it, like I was encroaching on her space or her life. It was early 2017, and life

was brimming, and I imagined how cool it would be to celebrate our twenty-ninth together and then have a whole year under our belts before facing the big thirty together, and so on and so on. But still, I didn't bring the shared birthday thing up. So she's a writer like me, but a real one. I mean, a more accomplished writer than me. At least from what she's said and from what I've read about her online. She hasn't shared her writing with me, and I haven't either. Probably we'll need to do that before she lets me do more than kiss her. They call her an assistant professor, but she doesn't do any assisting. Teaches all the classes on her own. It's just a title for professors when they're still young.

I said, "I like working for someone else right now. I don't really want the stress of figuring out how to go it alone." I wondered what she thought of us as a couple even though we were only three dates in—that night, the day I ran over Ronnie's bike, being our fourth. I wondered if she thought I had enough ambition for someone like her. But she agreed to a second, then a third, then a fourth date, so I told myself not to worry too much about it. We'd first met in the produce aisle of Stater Brothers. I helped her pick out avocados because I was right there getting myself some, and she looked confused, didn't know what shade she needed to be able to make guacamole that day. I said, "This one here is pretty good," and handed her the one I was holding. And then she looked up at me, and I was really taken aback by her eyes. Maybe not so much her eyes, which were a lovely medium brown, but her eye sockets. They were real round and her eyes looked big, and she was just kind of stunning standing there. And her hair was also brown, but darker than her eyes, and it was all wrapped up and held together with a pencil. If she sounds ordinary, I'm doing a bad job describing her. So I found the best avocados for her, felt around longer for hers than I did for my own, and five minutes of chit-chat led to a coffee later that same day. I'd told her I don't do that normally, ask girls out in grocery stores. She'd said, "Good. I hope not."

The waiter brought our drinks over, and Ashley looked around the room, kind of surveying it before she grabbed her wine and took a sip. I'd noticed that she'd done that on the other dates too, kind of took inventory of who was in the restaurant before letting lips meet wine.

This time I asked, "Everything okay?"

She said, "Yeah." She said, "Want to hear a funny story?"

"Always," I said. And I took a sip of my wine. Some red kind, same as Ashley was having. I normally order a beer, but after she ordered her wine and the waiter was staring at me, I just asked for the same thing the lady was having,

and I felt like an idiot because I hadn't done that on the other dates, but Ashley smiled, so it was okay.

"Well," she said. "I'm not really supposed to be drinking out in public. In case my students see me. Or some straight-laced professor. Isn't that lame?"

"That's jacked up," I said. "Is that a rule then, about teaching there?"

Ashley taught at Hardin College, which isn't in Riverside but is about twenty minutes south in a tiny town called Coyote Corner. They've got about one thousand students there. The town might be double that. When she got the job at Hardin, she moved to Riverside because it had the most culture, she said, out of the inland cities.

"It's not a rule exactly," she said. "It's not in the contract I signed, but it's implied. Expected even. So here's the story. When I was on my campus visit two years ago, I was interviewing with the provost, and I'd already done my teaching demo, and it had gone really well, and one of the faculty I had breakfast with that morning told me that if candidates do well throughout the day, they get an interview with the president after their interview with the provost, but not everyone gets that far, but because it's a small school and the president wants to have his hand in everything, they only schedule campus visits with candidates when the president is on campus. Am I making sense? Is this making sense? This is boring."

"No," I said. "It makes sense," I said. "It's interesting."

"Ok. Thanks," she said. "If you say so," she said. "So after a long day of this and that, I'm in the provost's office, and he's been asking me questions about my research and writing some but mostly about teaching, and then he starts talking about the history of the school, and he seems proud of their fundamentalist roots, and he's talking about the code of ethics and expectations for students and faculty, and I'm on board with a lot of what he'd said so far except the homophobia, and then he asks me if I drink."

"Can he do that?"

"I mean in this case, I guess so. And I wanted to be honest throughout the whole process. Because I had another year of funding in my program, I didn't have to take a job that year if I didn't want to, but also the job market is terrible right now, so you kind of should take any full-time position you can get your hands on. So he asks me if I drink, and I look at him and I say, 'Well, I do occasionally enjoy a glass of wine with dinner.' And he looks me over. Not in a creepy way. I could tell he was figuring out if he was going to help me at this point. Then he says, 'Well, here's the thing. This is where we're at. The search

committee has indicated to me that you are a particularly strong candidate, and I agree with them—I'm not trying to brag. That's just what he said—"

"Sure," I said. "Of course not."

"So he said I was a strong candidate, and then he said, 'We do have a policy here where we ask our faculty not to drink.' And I said, 'Oh.' And he said, 'Here's the thing. I don't care what you do at your home. I just don't want to hear from some parent or student that you were seen down at Pepito's with a pitcher of margaritas.' And he said, 'I'm going to recommend you for an interview with the president today, and at some point he's going to say to you, 'We have a policy where our faculty members don't drink. Are you okay with that? And I would suggest to you that the best answer one could give in that situation is, Yes, sir, I am okay with that.'"

"No shit," I said. "Sorry for that, the swearing, I mean, but damn."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm not a nun or something. But isn't that wild? But anyway, yeah, hence my looking over my shoulder before I partake of this heavenly glass of pinot with you at The Salted Pig."

We had a nice dinner, talking about this and that. She asked me about my day at work, but first I told her about hitting the homeless guy Ronnie and how he was okay, or at least I thought so, and how I was going to buy him a new bike in the morning. She said that was nice of me.

When I walked her to her car, we peck-kissed on the lips like we did after date number three, and then she said, "Let's get together tomorrow night if you're free," and that excited me because up until then it had always been me asking.

On the drive home, crossing the bridge again, this time at night with the streetlamps glowing, I realized that I'd forgotten to ask her about the text she'd sent and that she'd never brought it up—*We have something to talk about to-night*—the whole reason I'd rammed into Ronnie in the first place. I texted her right when I got home, asked her about it.

It's nothing to worry about, she wrote. It was a work-related thing having to do with that conference I went to. A connection leading to a good publication for me.

Congrats!!! I wrote. That's wonderful!!! I wrote. I feel like a jerk for forgetting to ask.

You're not a jerk, she wrote. You're a sweet one, she wrote. Good night.

And I wanted to write so much to her in that moment, because maybe I felt her slipping away, or maybe I just then was realizing how into her I was, but I knew I should let her be and that the only thing to write then was *Good night. Sleep well.* So I wrote that, and that ended our string of texts, and then I stared

at my ceiling for a long while, debating going for a night walk or a night drive, debating finding some book to read, but I just stared at the ceiling, considering the patterns in the drywall, the grooves like tiny rivers, dried-up rivers leading to nowhere. I couldn't turn my mind off, so I talked aloud to myself for a while. Because that helps sometimes. Because sometimes I need to hear what I'm thinking to know exactly what I mean. So I said things like, "Perhaps she'll be the one for you. And you'll be the one for her. But maybe not. So try not to act all crazy or do anything crazy. And don't get too obsessed over her like you're doing now. Okay? Try to avoid stuff like this every night. Okay?" And I answered back things like, "You're right. I know." And I said to myself, "I won't. I won't think of her more than I should." But I knew I was just saying that to appease myself. I knew that thoughts can't be controlled like actions.

And while I was talking aloud and studying the ceiling, every now and then I'd pinch a thigh, a forearm, a finger just to make sure I was still whole. It's an odd fear, I guess, one I've mostly outgrown. As a kid, I worried that my mind would disconnect from my body if I stayed up all night thinking instead of sleeping. I'd imagine a ghostly version of myself floating above my body, trying and failing to get back inside. I'd pinch my chest to get grounded again. I'd whisper things to myself like, "Mind, don't you dare leave this body." Now, in bed, Ashley on the mind, I pinched a new piece of skin every ten minutes or so while I talked to myself. I tried to say aloud little stories that I could jot down later. But each one started, "Once there was a boy who loved Ashley," and then it would fizzle out after only a few sentences, a few sentences of hopeful nonsense, things like us living in the woods in a cabin overlooking the ocean where we are famous writers who live obscurely, splashing into the world now and again to greet adoring fans and do cameos in independent films before returning to our clifftop residence. But really, that's not what I want for myself. I'm content to be unknown. I expect that. I can't see a reason why the world would need to know about me when I'm gone. I'm just after a bit of comfort while I'm here.

Maybe tomorrow morning I'll actually meet up with that homeless guy Ronnie and buy him a new bike. Probably Ashley is a fantasy that will fizzle out. Probably Ashley will leave me soon if she even considers us a thing at this point. But somewhere in a burnt-orange tent, Ronnie is thinking of me. Ronnie is thinking of the guy who ran him over, who promised him a new bike in the morning. Ronnie must be curled up with his dog Henry. He must be talking to him, telling him about his crazy day, letting the dog curl into his warmth, saying to him what a good boy he is for killing the rats and never once calling him a failure or a bad owner. Then I said, "Once there was a boy who loved Ashley,"

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and I said, "Once there was a boy destined to be a homeless man in a dried-up riverbed," and I said, "Once there was a dog destined to be a rat killer for a homeless man," and I said, "Once there was a girl who maybe and hopefully was destined to love me but probably isn't and really I'll be okay either way." And I said, "We'll see how this plays out." And I said, "You know how this plays out." And I said, "You're probably right." And I said again and again and again, "Mind, don't you leave this body. Mind, don't you leave this body," until I reached the point when sleep finally took over.