

FIRST PART

The Knock

The knock stabs at the air so hard it bleeds. The sound lingers like the endless vibration of a tuning fork, cascading from loud chime to low, insistent hum, from the plaster of the ceiling to the space between the hairs of the egg-white carpet.

The woman grips the collar of her pink, stringy bathrobe as she shuffles to the door, which shakes again on the strength of three heavy raps. When she speaks, she chokes on her own words.

“Who’s there?” she says.

Through the door, the response is muffled but tough. “Police,” a man says.

Kneading her shirt between her knuckles, the woman takes a cautious step back, the heel of her tense right foot rising above the deep red stain that never would come out, and says, as loudly as she can (which isn’t very), “I don’t believe you.”

The door does not reply. It only stares, accusing and cruel.

And then its face breaks in from the back with a horrible crunch, plaster and wood collapsing as the door propels open, its doorknob bashing into the wall like a battering ram. A bearded man charges forward through the gap, aiming a night black pistol directly at the woman. She stumbles backwards, tripping over her own heel and falling down onto the carpet. The man who stands in front of her is not a police officer. And he has only one ear.

“Stay down!” the man says. “Stay down!”

“Is anyone else here?” The second man, broad and black, steps through the cracked and broken doorframe. He waves a similar gun around the room in a rainbow arc. He, too, has only one ear, his right, with only a flat wide bandage where the left ear used to be. And as

he aims, his alert white eyes scanning the room in a perfect sweep, a third man squeezes in behind him.

Except the third man isn't a man.

The third man is a boy.

"My—my husband's a police officer!" the woman says, now on her hands and feet in some sort of crab walk, scuttling away. "He'll—don't—"

"We know," says the second man.

"Stay down!" says the first.

"Is Detective Joel MacDonald home?"

The boy, small and skinny, disappears behind the second man, his eyes looking down toward his shoes, gray and worn, the start of a hole by the toes of the right foot. He holds his own gun to his side, cold against his thigh, where the only person it can hurt is himself.

From somewhere comes the creak of a door, descending like a nervous violin.

"No, no, he's—he's not here!" cries the woman.

"Then we'll wait," says the second man.

"Mom?" The voice is a new voice, a girl's voice, cutting through the clamor, but only for a moment. The second man, the alert man, spins around, his gun pointed in a perfect bee-line through the head of the teenage girl standing just outside the apartment's stuffy little hallway. "What's happening?" says the girl.

The boy, who wears a torn white undershirt, does not look at the girl. He looks instead into the small kitchen only a couple yards away, staring as if it's some oasis in the faraway distance. A silver scrape in the white counter glows just slightly white under the hum of fluorescent lights. He stares at the scrape until it seems to be a living thing, wiggling and wriggling, and he squeezes his own thumb so hard his knuckle cracks, and consequently he doesn't see the second man pointing his gun at the girl, or the girl turning toward the boy with the sad white eyes of recognition.

"Danny?" says the girl.

That breaks his concentration. Now, the boy, whose name is Daniel, glances her way, but it's a half-look at best, tilting from the corners of his quickly blinking eyes. His breath catches halfway through the exhale, like a thin shirt on a sharp twig. And when he pulls it free, it tears a little, just a little.

"Hi, Katie," he says.

The Traffic Light

This happened earlier:

There is a room, one long forgotten now, with a bumpy white ceiling and red *Daredevil* posters lining pale blue walls. It has a close-cropped blue carpet and a closet door on its third handle. It has an alarm clock, wailing as it sits on the chipped silver radiator, which echoes the alarm in an atonal ring.

The kid underneath the once fluffy blue covers, fourteen and scrawny, covers his face and ears with a white pillow so that the dream, desperate to make its way out of his head and into some sort of oblivion, cannot escape. Already, the dream is hard to keep hold of, but it's something sunny, and most critically, it includes people—other people who aren't him. That's the important thing. That's why he shuts his eyes and holds on tight, even as the alarm clock on the radiator announces 7:10 in bright red LED and loud, resounding beeps.

But each *beep* pounds the dream like a hammer on a nail, each smack forcing it more decisively through his skull until the hole is big enough that not even the pillow can keep it there. When he reaches over the radiator to the alarm clock and switches the thing off, its blare coming to an anticlimactic close, he finds himself staring upward at the cloud of nothing that fills the instant silence.

The fact of the matter, the stupid, back-breaking fact of the matter, is there's no school. There's no need to wake up at 7:10. There's no need to deal with the alarm. But yesterday, when he turned it off and tried to sleep indefinitely, he found himself awake at the same time anyway, the absolute silence far more deafening than the broken blare of a ten-year-old alarm clock on a rickety radiator could ever be. The alarm itself proves no more restful, though, than the

silence had. His eyes are open. His ears are open. He's no better off.

Getting out of bed for some reason—loudly, not rolling out but climbing to his hands and knees, forcing the rattling metal *creak*—Daniel tries to hold on to the dream, or the memory, or whatever it was. Bits and pieces hover above his head like clouds, and when he grabs for them, his hands pass right through them. What he gets are flashes at best, sensations at worst. Little photographic flashes of kids on a playground. A little box of apple juice, yellow like the sun. Anxiety, but the old kind, which makes it the good kind. And Katie—Katie was there, too.

Daniel does not look at the picture tucked into his bed frame. Instead, he pulls the blue covers off his back—they match the walls, as if he ever cared—and steps down onto the carpet, trying to make it more of a stomp than a step. The neighbors won't mind. He isn't even sure if they're there anymore. The baby hasn't cried for a week at least.

The sun pouring in through the window tries to make up for everything. It dodges the bed almost skillfully, but then, that's what Daniel always liked about the room. On a weekend, or during the summer, he could stay in the dark as long as he liked, the transition in the morning on his own time, suddenly and completely. As he thinks about it, he wonders if it is, in fact, summer. Normally, the lack of buses would be a dead giveaway, except now, there wouldn't be buses anyway. As Daniel steps into the trapezoid of sunlight formed by his bedroom window, he finds himself staring outside. The moment he freezes is the moment the silence returns.

Outside Daniel's window stands a traffic light. It still works. The light is red now, and it's the same red as the LED display on his alarm clock, which now features a prominent 7:14. But as he watches the traffic light, he sees it flip to green, then, ultimately, to an under-appreciated yellow, and eventually back to red again. It's a strange thing to watch a traffic light every morning for maybe three weeks, without ever seeing any cars pass through. That's not to say there *weren't* cars, at least for a time. In fact, there are cars now, parked awkwardly against the curb, maybe three he can see right out in the middle of the road, doors opened and abandoned. But most are parked—the news anchors and the doctors had said not to drive, and the gas stations probably ran out of gas anyway.

There were motors, at least, the first week or so. There were a lot



the first day. But by the second week, the most Daniel ever heard in one day were seven, and by now it's been at least a week since the last one. Sometimes he heard sirens, but whether sirens or motors, he never actually saw the cars, police or otherwise, and he never saw motorcycles or buses. He ran to the window once when he thought one might be passing down Rentwood, but if it did, he missed it. He heard them until he stopped hearing them. He heard them until there was nothing left to hear. He doesn't know where they went. The motors only ever seemed to go in one direction. They certainly never came back.

The cars are lined up along the side of the road now, collecting dust and pollen from the stunted little trees lined up along the sidewalk, which rise like giant anthills. Sometimes a bird poops on them. Otherwise they don't move. The island outside is urban, relentlessly urban, and the tall brick wall across the street is the clearest sign of that. The island was born kinetic. That the cars would be as silent as the traffic light, that the light itself would be out of a job—that no one has gone to dinner or work or even to *school* for weeks . . .

Pushing himself off the window and away from the sound of cars *not* driving, of motors *not* running, of horns *not* honking, Daniel heads to the bathroom, past his mom's bedroom, which no one has slept in for three days. (The first two days, Daniel checked, but today he doesn't bother. He can't.) In the small, white bathroom two rooms down, Daniel reaches behind the curtain for the shower knob, but the moment he starts to twist it, he pulls his hand away, as if the knob is a boiling teapot. For all the news has been saying, maybe it is. At least twice in the first five days, he turned the shower on by accident, and his mom, listening like a deer for the crunch of a hunter's boots, came running to stop him before he touched the water or breathed it. He never told her, but a little got on his fingers. It didn't seem to do any damage.

Maybe it never could have. After all, they don't know what's causing it. They don't claim to. But, hey, it *could* be the water. It could be the water as easily as anything else, and better safe than sorry or dead. So they said, "Don't shower. Don't bathe. Don't use your sinks. We'll bring you water." But they didn't bring much, and eventually, they weren't bringing any at all. At that point, using the water that way seemed outright wasteful, so Daniel stopped bathing at all, no

matter how dirty and dusty he felt. But he still brushes his teeth. He uses the bottled water, what little is left. His mom will have more when she gets back.

But Daniel has plenty of deodorant. He has floss—enough for months to come. He has shirts, pants, and underwear, even if it's all gotten a bit grimy at this point, so he can at least look presentable for the inevitable audience of no one. Katie would get the joke if the phone lines weren't down, and if she wasn't so many blocks away, and if it was safe to take that first step outside and look for her.

The traffic light flips from green to yellow to red. The world does not react.

Daniel stares at himself in his smudgy bathroom mirror.

Silent House

Sometimes Daniel turns the TV on, loud, and doesn't turn it off all day.

"... offered no indication of the situation beyond Crawford Street," says a woman, whose hair is made-up and her suit dry-cleaned and who probably showered before driving, outside of all places, to work this morning.

Daniel sits at the tan counter in the kitchen, eating a breakfast of Cheerios and water—Cheerios, because it's the only breakfast food left in the apartment, and water, because there isn't any milk left, and you've got to have cereal with *something*. The TV, a little old black one sitting awkwardly against the wall, picks up what little it can, but the image and sound have been inconsistent at best ever since Daniel's mom accidentally shoved it to the floor while making herb potatoes, so when Daniel reaches forward and turns the volume up—as loud as he can, louder than silence could *ever* be—only half of it is talk, and the other half gibberish at best and silence at worst.

Some military official is on camera now. Maybe he's a captain or a colonel or something. The reporter holds a microphone to his face. The words "everything we can" filter in between bursts of pointless static. An insistent squiggly gray line covers the old man's eyes and face, so all Daniel can see is the jerking mouth, changing into the reflection of a million funhouse mirrors. "You'll know something when we do," he says, with confidence.

Behind the captain or colonel or something is some square, brownish building, and in front of that a little circle of a road with a short, stubby tree. Daniel passed by it a bunch of times in the back-seat of his mom's Toyota, just a little bit past the bridge and into the

body of the city beyond. It used to be pretty close. Now it's an outside interview in an outside place with not even a single trace of one of those biohazard suits the doctors wore before they left. Daniel starts to imagine what might be beyond the camera. There's probably a crowd of people, walking around and breathing the air and whispering to each other, "I've seen her on TV." Probably a couple of them work in offices. They have briefcases and handkerchiefs, and one is so distracted that he forgets he's late for work. His boss will be pissed. A couple other kids play soccer right behind them, and one almost kicks the ball into the camera by accident, but the other stops it just in time.

Daniel turns the volume up. He slams his palm into the side of the screen until the jagged black and gray lines veil the entire image. The sound transitions into a steady white noise. The picture could be anything, and maybe it is.

Daniel takes a bite of his Cheerios. They're soggy. He chews it just the same, and as he closes his eyes, he imagines milk, the whole kind, or even chocolate milk, which would be great. So he swallows it all the way down, feeling it slip and slurp down his throat, and that's when he hears the *pop*.

His spoon freezes above the bowl, a little droplet of not-chocolate milk dripping back into the bowl with an indistinguishable splash. Daniel quickly turns the volume down, and as he does, he catches the much louder second *pop*, as sharp and sudden as a balloon left floating against a light bulb. With a metal clang, Daniel's spoon drops to the side of the bowl, then sinks into the water. His eyes turn toward the window on the far side of the living room, which faces the red brick building next-door. The sun catches the nearest window on the opposite end of the street, but from here, the view reveals nothing. Sliding off his stool, Daniel tip-toes out of the kitchen and into the adjoining living room. Floorboards creak beneath his feet. His mom's record collection sits organized against the wall, and her necklace, thrown off just before she last left, lies in a sprawl on the table. The table is a dark, leathery rainforest green, which folds and crinkles at the corners.

As Daniel squeezes his hands against the cool window, he hears it again, louder than before. He presses his face against the glass, staring down onto the narrow street below. It isn't empty. Down



the block, passing by the boarded-up shop where Mr. Gomez used to work, is a man—maybe. It's hard to see. Three stories down and almost a whole block away, the figure walks forward with something of a limp, its (his? her?) left leg dragging its right one along. Pebbles part for its dangling toes. The top of its head is mostly bald, what little hair there is circling around the back in a thin ring. Its right arm, poking out through a badly torn short-sleeved shirt featuring some cartoon cow, is stiff and straight, as if it doesn't have an elbow, instead just a long stick of a thing protruding from the shoulder.

Its right hand holds a gun.

The arm rises into the air, still completely straight, and the gun, pointed forward, fires so loudly it cracks Daniel's eardrums even through the glass. With a loud whine, the bullet ricochets somewhere out to the left, but it doesn't seem to hit anything that can feel it. The figure shuffles forward, and Daniel, staring, imagines the sound of a maybe-limp foot scraping against concrete. Its face is wrong somehow. It's red where it shouldn't be red. And just as the word *boil* sears itself into Daniel's mind like a sunburn, the man or woman or thing in the street turns, its face pointed up and left until its ambiguous, lumpy face, and maybe its eyes, are looking straight into Daniel's own window.

"You!" it says.

Daniel blinks. His fingers squeak along the glass.

"It's all your fault!" it cries.

Before Daniel can even begin to consider what that might mean, the thing turns its whole body, and the arm rises again—the stiff arm, the bad arm, the arm with the gun. It's aimed at the window now. For just a moment, a frigid frozen moment, the arm remains there, like the barrier of a railroad crossing. It doesn't shake at all. Neither does Daniel, though he wants to.

There is a gun pointing at him.

The gun fires, its pop drowned out immediately by the crash of shattering glass and the scream in Daniel's throat. Daniel jumps back, tripping to the floor, shielding himself from the thousand scattered pieces of what used to be his window. He sees them on the floor, jagged and sharp; he feels them on his neck and back; and as he crawls away, his breathing loud and hard and fast, he sees on the back of his eyelids the thing and its railroad-crossing arm and its blood-red funhouse-mirror face.

His heart pounds into his ribs like a boxer's fists into a punching bag, and it's so loud he hardly hears the second sound, the one that might be a pop but maybe isn't. As the light static from the TV hisses in incongruous monotony, a piece of glass weaves its way into Daniel's left hand, but Daniel doesn't notice, crawling under the counter in the kitchen where the thing outside can't get to him. The angles are all wrong. He squeezes into the wall as tightly as he possibly can. He pulls his hands to his cheeks. His left cheek shoves the shard deep into his flesh.

Now he feels it. Now he cries out, but he doesn't look at it. Instead, he looks at what used to be a window, glass tinkling down from the top. A breeze finds the opening and pushes through, and it won't shut up. It hits Daniel's face. He shuts his eyes and tries not to breathe it in. He feels the hot blood racing around the wound in his hand. He sees the boil and the thing with the gun. When Daniel coughs, his eyes burst open, landing on a fragile piece of glass rattling in the broken window. It looks like the one in his hand. He crouches down and vomits.

As Daniel holds himself up on one hand, one arm, and two knees, trying not to look at the remains of his breakfast, something pounds against his door. It pounds again, and it pounds again. Instinctively pushing himself up and away from the mess he's made, Daniel scurries back from the door, but he hasn't gotten far when the voice calls out, "Police. Open up."

Daniel stops mid-scuttle. He stares at the door. It shakes in its hinges when whoever on the other end *knock-knock-knocks* again.

"Anyone in there?"

Daniel opens his mouth to respond, but the first thing that comes out is a cough and just a little more vomit. He clears his throat, then manages, "Yeah . . ."

"Open up."

Slowly, unsteadily, Daniel climbs to his feet. The floorboards squeak in resistance. Wincing, Daniel pulls the glass from his hand—it clinks as it hits the floor—and he holds the wound tight. "Are you . . ." Daniel coughs again as he steps closer to the door. "Are you—"

"It's safe. We got him."

The door has not been opened for a long time. It hasn't been opened for someone coming in for even longer—too long, in fact,



given how long it's been since the last time someone went out. As he reaches for the deadbolt, Daniel's skinny fingers dance, shaking around the metal before they finally get a good grasp on it. With the idea of *safe* playing around in his head, Daniel unbolts the door, unlocks it, turns the knob, and pulls it open.

"Thanks, kid," says the first of two officers. He carries a duffel bag. He has a scar on his right cheek, a curvy little thing that widens at the top like a firework. Daniel imagines the blade of a knife carving through the flesh. Blood pounds against the wound in his hand. The other officer is shaped very much like a bulldog, big and squat and muscular, with wide, fat cheeks that flop down along the sides of his chin. Maybe he's smiling—his big, round eyes make it look as if he is—but his mouth is covered by a white surgical mask. Both their mouths are. The white stands out against the pristine blue of their uniforms and the still shiny copper badges pinned against their chests.

"Can we come in?" says the second officer.

Daniel notices he's shaking and tries to stop. The wind whistles through the window. "Yeah," he says, taking a little step back. "Yeah."

The first officer takes the lead, his dark eyes scanning the small room—the half-eaten cereal on the counter, and the regurgitated other half on the floor. They dart to the flickering light of the screwed-up television and the carpet of glass lining the floor. "Are you okay?" he says.

"Um," says Daniel. He glances at the window, remnants of glass zigzagging around the open hole in a wildly uneven circumference.

"Tough luck," says the second officer. With what might be a frown, he glances at Daniel's hand, then tugs a sheet of paper towel from the almost empty roll on the counter. "Keep pressure on it," he says, handing the towel to Daniel.

"Did you know that man?" says the first officer. He kneels down and lifts a shard of glass, as if he's studying it for fingerprints.

"No," says Daniel.

"He said, 'It's all your fault.'"

"I didn't know him."

"Mm-hm." The first officer nods, and then, with a slight grunt, rises to his feet. "A lot of them say things like that. They get sick, right, and they don't know what's what. Disease messes with their minds."

"They're nuts," adds the second.

"They're nuts. Don't worry about it."

"Okay . . ." says Daniel. The beaming sunlight cast through the shattered window projects a strange, jagged shadow pattern on the hardwood floor, like a giant mouth full of sharp, razorblade teeth. As the cool wind blows through the opening, Daniel imagines tiny little particles, a quiet red dust, flittering in and riding the currents, settling into a thin, grainy sand on the floor. Then he turns away and looks at the officers' surgical masks.

"Your mom here?" the first officer says. "Dad?"

"My mom went to get some toilet paper," says Daniel.

The police officers pause at this, the first one gazing at Daniel, the second specifically not. "When was that?" says the first.

"Three . . ." Daniel swallows. "Three days ago."

The officers look at one another, then back to Daniel. "Listen, kid," says the first officer, tracing his scar with a fingernail, "you know about the Give and Take?"

Daniel shakes his head.

"Give and Take is kind of a trade, see?" The officer crosses his arms as he says it, affecting almost the tone of a teacher talking down to a little kid. Daniel looks out the window. He's not a little kid. He's fourteen. "We're collecting all the guns," says the officer, "so *that* . . ."—he points to where Daniel's already looking, just as another shard of glass falls forward and out the window—" . . . don't happen." He sniffs. "And in return, we deliver food and supplies right to your door. That sound okay?"

Daniel glances back at the counter, where soggy Cheerios are drowning in lukewarm water. "I guess," he says.

"Any guns here?"

"My mom has a gun."

"Get it for me?"

With a small nod, Daniel steps away, wood groaning quietly beneath his feet. It's a short way down the hall to the room, where the door stands slightly open. A little shadow-slit fills the gap. Outside the door, Daniel listens closely for the squeak of bed-springs, the sigh without an audience, the rumbling and rustling of drawers—for anything except the long, slow, high creak of the door nudging open, and the total, aborted silence behind it.



This will be the first time he's checked today. What if she's here?
What if she's not?

He rests his fingertips on the door.

The nudge. The creak. The silence.

A hazy aura of light flows into the room through the window on the left, but it's not much. The room is not dark but dim, and the covers are halfway down the single bed, folded at odd bends, every flap and every sheet exactly where it was yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that when his mom climbed out of it in the first place.

There's no one here. There's no one here. There's no one here.

Daniel breathes in scattered little bursts. Sliding his feet along the furry blue carpet, keeping his eyes down, he makes his way to the old cabinet drawer and pulls it open. The gun is there. He's never touched it. His mom drilled that one into his head just fine, and Katie's dad, a police officer himself, echoed the point. The gun is there in case there's a burglar in the house, which you need to be ready for in the city when it's just the two of you.

But nothing's worth anything anymore, and it's just the one of them.

Dropping the paper towel, lightly blotted with blood, on the counter, Daniel lifts the gun by the handle, holding it between two fingers. The barrel scrapes against the thin wood. Daniel holds it at a distance, as if it's contaminated, which is funny, really, because it's one of the only things he can be absolutely sure is not. He leaves the orphaned bedroom behind and heads back out into the living room by the door, where the second officer, the heavy one with the bulldog cheeks, flips through Daniel's mom's record collection.

"You know how rare this is?" says the second officer, pulling one album the whole way out of the shelf. The record is *Cold Spring Harbor* by Billy Joel. It's the original, Daniel's mom once told him, before they fixed the speed and screwed it up. "This is pretty rare."

The first officer takes the gun from Daniel's hand. "Thanks," he says, dropping it into his duffel bag.

"You . . . you need to put it back in alphabetical order," says Daniel, eyes on the second officer.

The officer gives him a look. Then he drops the record into the bag, and goes back to the shelf. "I love this one!" he says, tugging

another one off its perch, but it's in the bag before Daniel can see what it is.

"Necklace," says the first officer. He jerks his head toward the living room table, where the green necklace lies splayed across the wood.

"Oh, Gina will love that." The second officer walks over, reaches down, and scoops it up in a meaty paw. He glances back over to his partner, who's opened the duffel bag like a big basketball hoop. In some kind of alley-oop, the second tosses the necklace into the bag, where it jingles pleasantly against the metal of the gun. Daniel stares at the officer but says nothing. The officer returns his look.

"Tip," he says.

Daniel's mouth opens and closes.

"Head out?" says the first officer.

"Think so."

As the first officer reaches for the knob, Daniel manages a scratchy, barely-there "Wait." They both stop and turn. "My mom," says Daniel. In his head, he hears a nudge and a creak and a nothing. He sees an empty room she must eventually return to, the way a clock must eventually strike 7:10. He should focus on that. He should leave it alone. But the words are already halfway out of his mouth. "You think . . ." says Daniel. He has their attention now. "Um, my mom," says Daniel. "You think maybe . . . maybe she'll be back soon?"

As he turns the knob and opens the door, the first officer's eyes widen a little. "Out there three days?" he says. He cocks his head to the side. For a moment, it looks as if he's going to say something else, and in that moment, anything is possible. But then, without another word, the officer steps out the door, his bulldog partner following right behind. The door slams shut behind them.

A breeze whips through the window like an off-key whistle. It will never be quiet in this apartment again. That's what Daniel wanted, right?

Daniel hugs himself tightly.