

# ONE

Sunday, June 21, 2015  
Dorset, Ontario, Canada  
8:43 p.m. eastern time  
8,996 sleeps since

I AM A CHANGED MAN. I knew it before I walked through our weather-worn oak door, its original storm cover rusted and removed years ago. (It doesn't rain enough here to warrant buying another, I remember telling Bay as I struggled to remove it from its hinges. The screws were stripped, and it took me much longer than I anticipated.) I knew I was changed, in the permanent sense, the moment my bare bicycle tire kissed the end of our driveway, and I was unsure whether I'd come home to the right house. I know it now, beyond any shadow of a doubt, as I sit here in the rocking chair that has been sitting in the same corner of our matchbox bedroom since before William was born.

The golden rays of the setting sun have always glimmered this way from the rocking chair, coming into our bedroom. High windows—a surprising feature for a squat bungalow—top the western and southern walls. On sweltering nights, the humid

kind we sometimes get here, we would leave all the windows open. The evening breeze would blow through, cooling the sweat on our bodies, transporting us somewhere far away and far more exotic as we lay together, trembling in bed.

Yes, the windows must have kept us here. That, and there was never enough time or money back then to consider going anywhere else.

Recalling how the day's dying light would illuminate Bay's face, calm and smooth as though she hadn't a care in all the world, perplexes me more than anything else I've encountered. I saw this same sun yesterday. This seems impossible because I haven't set foot inside the walls of our home in a quarter century. I've been gone almost twenty-five years. How can it be I'm the only thing that's changed?

If I've learned anything, it's that the word *impossible* is as real as a sun that never sets, waves that never crash, a dreaming soul who never sleeps.

I would say I'm a stranger in my own home, except I'm not. Everything is exactly as I left it, one day ago. Not even the most thirst-quenched blades of grass on our postage-stamp lawn have grown since I saw them last. I'm coming home not as a stranger, but as a lost soul who has found absolution—

I'll stop myself there.

So much time spent alone, living in a silence only stars and planets should come to know, has left its mark. I don't know when I'm rambling, or saying something no one wants to hear.

I close my eyes and empty my mind, make myself steady and clear for the thing I must do next. I've done this many times before, each time more unnerving than the last. This time, this final time, is most unnerving of all. What if I've lost the skill? What if her closed lids never crack light for me again? What if my life has been the cheap trick of a bored bully, and all our suffering and bliss has come down to this precise moment,

and I'm about to be the punchline? These echoes, they haunt. Questions are my plague, though I know none of it matters in the end. I've seen all there is to see in this world, and more. If this is how man, this man, discovers he has a destiny, so be it. I have lived enough to be grateful to have been let in on the joke at all.

Ah. There I go again. An old man beneath a gaze that won't bend.

"This is it, Jocko," I mutter to the gray-bearded schnauzer who lays guard next to Bay on the bed. Jock hasn't drawn a single breath in ten years, but he's never looked more alive.

A fit of coughing overtakes me. I wait for it to pass. Water hasn't soothed my throat for many months now, so I don't bother reaching for my bottle.

I can't get over the feeling I've forgotten something important. Maybe the most important thing. A familiar, lingering fear. I feel it every time. My mind isn't as sharp as it used to be. I tell myself it's up to its old tricks again.

I shake my body all over, blow my cheeks and flap my tongue to make noises that would embarrass my mother, and her mother before her, but not Bay. Never Bay.

Thoughts of her help me to relax. I'm as ready as one can be for the cacophony of the universe.

I clear my mind.

A dandelion appears in the empty expanse between my ears where rambling thoughts recently echoed. It's the kind of dandelion that's covered in fluffy seeds, like tiny feather parasols, waiting to be carried off on a hazy day's warm breeze. I don't need to remember the dandelion, or anything at all for that matter, but I do because I like the ritual of it. It's like tipping my hat to the universe before it swings wide the door for me to step through. *Besides*, my darkest corners whisper, *if I stop giving thanks, maybe next time I'll be refused passage*. I'll be locked

somewhere I don't want to be, and Bay will never know if we made it. So, I pick a memory (rather, one picks me, since all I do is invite any to pop into my mind), and I give thanks.

I recall the dandelion moment and whisper, "Go," in the same instant. *Tapered kernels carrying the promise of new life, each with its own feather cap, scatter like a trail of breadcrumbs up across the sky. Pluck them from their cloud beds and plant them in the earth, one by one, a thousand at a time. Go.*

The sudden lack of quiet is overwhelming, but I've been waiting a long time to hear her speak. I'm attuned to her gentle notes. I can't miss it in the din.

"Vole." A feather's sigh. Her voice is like that now, feathery and light, as though every pump of her lungs is shallow and barely there.

I feel a warm tongue on the back of my hand and a cold nose pushing into my palm. My fingers move, automatically locating the spot behind Jock's salt-and-pepper moustache. The dog leans into my touch. I revel in the pulsing weight of his head. We're great friends now, he and I. Before I used to rub him down and give him treats no more than once a day, but for the past twenty-four hours of his life, I've barely stopped; though, in all that time, he never once leaned into my hand like he is now.

"How long this time?"

It takes me a moment to understand her words. Gathering meaning from sound is a skill, like riding a bike. The first few times you try after years of negligence, you're wobbly and slow and wont to do something stupid.

I shake my head, still my trembling arms, take a swallow of water.

"Vole?"

"I'm sorry, honeybee," I apologize, squeeze her hand. I'd forgotten she can no longer see.

"It hasn't been long," I tell her. She smiles in my direction, a blaze of sunshine and hope cast broadly (she could do that—lighten up a dark room with her bright smile), but she says nothing back. Hours ago, she would've fought me and insisted on hearing every detail of every day that passed between us while she took a blink, but she's too tired now. Instead, her sightless eyes turn inward, and I listen to her think.

"Did we make it?" she asks after some time.

"We did, my flower."

"I thought so. Will you tell me how it went? From the beginning. Please. I want to hear everything, one more time, before . . ." She trails off before asking, "Will you do that for me?"

I'm grateful, for once, she can't see, because she'd be disturbed by the tears cascading down my cracked cheeks and dribbling off my chin. Bay hated seeing anyone cry. It made her cry a thousand times harder. She has a special kind of beauty of the soul. The rare kind that absorbs pain from others and grants them freedom and relief in turn, but she suffers for it.

As though she can sense my distress, she brings my skeleton hand to her lips and trails kisses, pollen-sweet, across my knuckle. "*Sbbb*." She shushes me like she once shushed our baby boy in his pinewood crib. "Don't be sad. Not for me. I'm the luckiest girl in the world because of you."

My throat eases barely enough to release a chuckle. It's our own private joke, this thing called *luck*—a concept I would've disregarded for most of our marriage. Where once I would've scoffed, said luck has nothing to do with anything, that hard work and patience is king, today I give credit where credit is due.

"You were born lucky, honeybee. I had nothing to do with it. Are you comfortable?"

"I am."

She taps the soft mattress next to her, and Jock abandons my roving fingers to sit by his mistress. The dog and I seek to share a lot in common.

“Good,” I say. “Your medicine’s right next to you.” I guide her hand to the cup that holds her pills. I help her swallow them down with small sips of water. One at a time. A pause between each. Sip, sip. Another. She’s so tired.

“From the beginning?”

“From the very beginning,” I confirm, and I lie down next to her.

A gentle wind pushes and pulls; shadows, dappled, tickle my peripheries. I take pleasure in pretending to ignore these barest of movements while letting them wash over me in silence. I’m reminded of how busy life is supposed to be.

I place her head on my chest as gently as I would a newborn babe and wrap her in my arms, as drafty and thin as they are. These days my creaky body is most at ease sitting, but now I’m home, and twisted sinew gives way. The downy softness of our bed cradles me in comfort, and relief cascades through my bones. We’ve slept this way, in this bed, for decades. Barely missing more than a day. The mattress knows the curves and dips of our bodies well. When the disease began to eat away at Bay’s frame, the spaces in our bed that formed over years seemed to envelop her. Now, we are both so frail we must look like little James tucked inside his giant peach as we curl up close to one another.

“I love you,” I whisper and wait to hear what comes next. It’s the longest moment of them all.

“I love you too, you old sap.”

Her head rises and falls with my quiet laugh. I’m foolish to doubt her love, she reminds me. She doesn’t know what doubt feels like the way I do. How it can grow so large it blots out everything familiar and good. Then again, maybe she does.

Who am I to know what nightmares come alive inside her? I've spent an eternity alone, and I've barely come to know those that haunt me.

Jock presses against Bay closer than ever before. The three of us lie there, fitted together like the nested measuring spoons William gave us years ago. They were one of the first gifts he ever bought, paid for with money he earned himself by sweeping floors at the pharmacy down the street. No matter how dented and scratched those spoons got, Bay refused to trade them in for a newer set.

The touch of Bay's skin and the scent of her hair distracts me. Little things, like the way she smells, and the way the tips of her once-long brown hair (now graying and shoulder-length, silky and soft) brush across her shoulders, are my greatest comforts. I've become used to a world unchanging and these constants have come to anchor me.

I digress, and I'm ashamed for wasting the most precious minutes of all. I must go back to the beginning as Bay has asked me to do. Back to when I was her husband, and she was



my wife, and we'd finished celebrating thirty-five years of marriage together. To when the fruit of this world we'd been waiting our entire lives to pluck folded in on itself, and everything came crashing down.