DENNIS LEHANE

MYSTIC RIVER

'One of the greats of crime writing' *Guardian*

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HarperCollins e-books

For my wife, Sheila

[He] did not understand women. It wasn't the way bartenders or comedians didn't understand women, it was the way poor people didn't understand the economy. You could stand outside the Girard Bank Building every day of your life and never guess anything about what went on in there. That's why, in their hearts, they'd always rather stick up a 7-Eleven.

—Pete Dexter, *God's Pocket*

There is no street with mute stones and no house without echoes.

—Góngora

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THE BOYS WHO ESCAPED FROM WOLVES

(1975)

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THE POINT AND THE FLATS

When Sean Devine and Jimmy Marcus were kids, their fathers worked together at the Coleman Candy plant and carried the stench of warm chocolate back home with them. It became a permanent character of their clothes, the beds they slept in, the vinyl backs of their car seats. Sean's kitchen smelled like a Fudgsicle, his bathroom like a Coleman Chew-Chew bar. By the time they were eleven, Sean and Jimmy had developed a hatred of sweets so total that they took their coffee black for the rest of their lives and never ate dessert.

On Saturdays, Jimmy's father would drop by the Devines' to have a beer with Sean's father. He'd bring Jimmy with him, and as one beer turned into six, plus two or three shots of Dewar's, Jimmy and Sean would play in the backyard, sometimes with Dave Boyle, a kid with girl's wrists and weak eyes who was always telling jokes he'd learned from his uncles. From the other side of the kitchen window screen, they could hear the hiss of the beer can pull-tabs, bursts of hard, sudden laughter, and the heavy snap of Zippos as Mr. Devine and Mr. Marcus lit their Luckys.

Sean's father, a foreman, had the better job. He was tall and fair and had a loose, easy smile that Sean had seen calm his mother's anger more than a few times, just shut it down like a switch had been flicked off inside of her. Jimmy's father loaded the trucks. He was small and his dark hair fell over his forehead in a tangle and something in his eyes seemed to buzz all the

time. He had a way of moving too quickly; you'd blink and he was on the other side of the room. Dave Boyle didn't have a father, just a lot of uncles, and the only reason he was usually there on those Saturdays was because he had this gift for attaching himself to Jimmy like lint; he'd see him leaving his house with his father, show up beside their car, half out of breath, going "What's up, Jimmy?" with a sad hopefulness.

They all lived in East Buckingham, just west of downtown, a neighborhood of cramped corner stores, small playgrounds, and butcher shops where meat, still pink with blood, hung in the windows. The bars had Irish names and Dodge Darts by the curbs. Women wore handkerchiefs tied off at the backs of their skulls and carried mock leather snap purses for their cigarettes. Until a couple of years ago, older boys had been plucked from the streets, as if by spaceships, and sent to war. They came back hollow and sullen a year or so later, or they didn't come back at all. Days, the mothers searched the papers for coupons. Nights, the fathers went to the bars. You knew everyone; nobody except those older boys ever left.

Jimmy and Dave came from the Flats, down by the Penitentiary Channel on the south side of Buckingham Avenue. It was only twelve blocks from Sean's street, but the Devines were north of the Ave., part of the Point, and the Point and the Flats didn't mix much.

It wasn't like the Point glittered with gold streets and silver spoons. It was just the Point, working class, blue collar, Chevys and Fords and Dodges parked in front of simple A-frames and the occasional small Victorian. But people in the Point owned. People in the Flats rented. Point families went to church, stayed together, held signs on street corners during election months. The Flats, though, who knew what they did, living like animals sometimes, ten to an apartment, trash in their streets—Wellieville, Sean and his friends at Saint Mike's called it, families living on the dole, sending their kids to public schools, divorcing. So while Sean went to Saint Mike's Parochial in black pants, black tie, and blue shirt, Jimmy and Dave went to the Lewis M. Dewey School on Blaxston. Kids at the Looey & Dooey got to wear street clothes, which was cool, but they usually wore the same ones three out of five days, which wasn't. There was an aura of grease to them—greasy hair, greasy skin, greasy collars and cuffs. A lot of the boys

had bumpy welts of acne and dropped out early. A few of the girls wore maternity dresses to graduation.

So if it wasn't for their fathers, they probably never would have been friends. During the week, they never hung out, but they had those Saturdays, and there was something to those days, whether they hung out in the backyard, or wandered through the gravel dumps off Harvest Street, or hopped the subways and rode downtown—not to see anything, just to move through the dark tunnels and hear the rattle and brake-scream of the cars as they cornered the tracks and the lights flickered on and off—that felt to Sean like a held breath. Anything could happen when you were with Jimmy. If he was aware there were rules—in the subway, on the streets, in a movie theater—he never showed it.

They were at South Station once, tossing an orange street hockey ball back and forth on the platform, and Jimmy missed Sean's throw and the ball bounced down onto the tracks. Before it occurred to Sean that Jimmy could even be thinking about it, Jimmy jumped off the platform and down onto the track, down there with the mice and the rats and the third rail.

People on the platform went nuts. They screamed at Jimmy. One woman turned the color of cigar ash as she bent at the knees and yelled, Get back up here, get back up here *now*, goddamnit! Sean heard a thick rumble that could have been a train entering the tunnel up at Washington Street or could have been trucks rolling along the street above, and the people on the platform heard it, too. They waved their arms, whipped their heads around to look for the subway police. One guy placed a forearm across his daughter's eyes.

Jimmy kept his head down, peering into the darkness under the platform for the ball. He found it. He wiped some black grime off it with his shirtsleeve and ignored the people kneeling on the yellow line, extending their hands down toward the track.

Dave nudged Sean and said, "Whew, huh?" too loud.

Jimmy walked along the center of the track toward the stairs at the far end of the platform, where the tunnel opened gaping and dark, and a heavier

rumble shook the station, and people were *jumping* now, banging fists into their hips. Jimmy took his time, strolling really, then he looked back over his shoulder, caught Sean's eyes, and grinned.

Dave said, "He's smiling. He's just nuts. You know?"

When Jimmy reached the first step in the cement stairs, several hands thrust down and yanked him up. Sean watched his feet swing out and to the left and his head curl and dip to the right, Jimmy looking so small and light in a big man's grasp, like he was filled with straw, but tucking that ball tight against his chest even as people grabbed at his elbow and his shin banged off the edge of the platform. Sean felt Dave jittering beside him, lost. Sean looked at the faces of the people pulling Jimmy up and he didn't see worry or fear anymore, none of the helplessness he'd seen just a minute ago. He saw rage, monsters' faces, the features gnarled and savage, like they were going to lean in and bite a chunk out of Jimmy, then beat him to death.

They got Jimmy up onto the platform and held him, fingers squeezed into his shoulders as they looked around for someone to tell them what to do. The train broke through the tunnel, and someone screamed, but then someone laughed—a shrieking cackle that made Sean think of witches around a cauldron—because the train burst through on the other side of the station, moving north, and Jimmy looked up into the faces of the people holding him as if to say, *See?*

Beside Sean, Dave let out this high-pitched giggle and threw up in his own hands.

Sean looked away, wondered where he fit in all this.

THAT NIGHT Sean's father sat him down in the basement tool room. The tool room was a tight place of black vises and coffee cans filled with nails and screws, piles of wood stacked neatly beneath the scarred counter that split the room in half, hammers hung in carpenter belts like guns in holsters, a band saw blade dangling from a hook. Sean's father, who often worked as a handyman around the neighborhood, came down here to build his birdhouses and the shelves he placed on the windows for his wife's flowers.

He'd planned the back porch here, something he and his friends threw up one blistering summer when Sean was five, and he came down here when he wanted peace and quiet, and sometimes when he was angry, Sean knew, angry at Sean or Sean's mother or his job. The birdhouses—baby Tudors and colonials and Victorians and Swiss chalets—ended up stacked in a corner of the cellar, so many of them they'd have had to live in the Amazon to find enough birds who could get use out of them.

Sean sat up on the old red bar stool and fingered the inside of the thick black vise, felt the oil and sawdust mixed in there, until his father said, "Sean, how many times I have to tell you about that?"

Sean pulled his finger back out, wiped the grease on his palm.

His father picked some stray nails up off the counter and placed them in a yellow coffee can. "I know you like Jimmy Marcus, but if you two want to play together from now on, you'll do it in view of the house. Yours, not his."

Sean nodded. Arguing with his father was pointless when he spoke as quietly and slowly as he was doing now, every word coming out of his mouth as if it had a small stone attached to it.

"We understand each other?" His father pushed the coffee can to his right, looked down at Sean.

Sean nodded. He watched his father's thick fingers rub sawdust off the tips.

"For how long?"

His father reached up and pulled a wisp of dust off a hook embedded in the ceiling. He kneaded it between his fingers, then tossed it in the wastebasket under the counter. "Oh, a good while, I'd say. And Sean?"

"Yes, sir?"

“Don’t be thinking about going to your mother on this one. She never wants you to see Jimmy again after that stunt today.”

“He’s not that bad. He’s—”

“Didn’t say he was. He’s just wild, and your mother’s had her fill of wild in her life.”

Sean saw something glint in his father’s face when he said “wild,” and he knew it was the other Billy Devine he was seeing for a moment, the one he’d had to build out of scraps of conversation he’d overheard from aunts and uncles. The Old Billy they called him, the “scrapper,” his uncle Colm said once with a smile, the Billy Devine who’d disappeared sometime before Sean was born to be replaced by this quiet, careful man with thick, nimble fingers who built too many birdhouses.

“You remember what we talked about,” his father said, and patted Sean’s shoulder in dismissal.

Sean left the tool room and walked through the cool basement wondering if what made him enjoy Jimmy’s company was the same thing that made his father enjoy hanging out with Mr. Marcus, drinking Saturday into Sunday, laughing too hard and too suddenly, and if that was what his mother was afraid of.

A FEW SATURDAYS LATER, Jimmy and Dave Boyle came by the Devine house without Jimmy’s father. They knocked on the back door as Sean was finishing breakfast, and Sean heard his mother open the door and say, “Morning to ya, Jimmy. Morning, Dave,” in that polite voice she used around people she wasn’t sure she wanted to see.

Jimmy was quiet today. All that loopy energy seemed to have gone coiled up inside of him. Sean could almost feel it beating against the walls of Jimmy’s chest and Jimmy swallowing against it. Jimmy seemed smaller, darker, as if he’d pop with the prick of a pin. Sean had seen this before. Jimmy had always been a little moody. Still, it got to Sean every time, made him wonder if Jimmy had any control over it, or if these moods came like a

sore throat or his mother's cousins, just dropped in whether you felt like having them over or not.

Dave Boyle was at his most aggravating when Jimmy was like this. Dave Boyle seemed to think it was his job to make sure everyone was happy, which usually just pissed people off after a while.

As they stood out on the sidewalk, trying to decide what to do, Jimmy all wrapped in himself and Sean still waking up, all three of them fidgeting with the day hanging out in front of them but bordered by the ends of Sean's street, Dave said, "Hey, why's a dog lick its balls?"

Neither Sean nor Jimmy answered. They'd heard this one, like, a thousand times.

"Because it can!" Dave Boyle shrieked, and grabbed his gut like it was so funny it hurt.

Jimmy walked over to the sawhorses, where city crews had been replacing several squares of sidewalk. The work crews had tied yellow CAUTION tape to four sawhorses in a rectangle, created a barricade around the new sidewalk squares, but Jimmy snapped the tape by walking through it. He squatted at the edge, his Keds on the old sidewalk, and used a twig on the soft pavement to carve thin lines that reminded Sean of old men's fingers.

"My dad don't work with yours anymore."

"How come?" Sean squatted by Jimmy. He didn't have a stick, but he wanted one. He wanted to do what Jimmy did, even if he didn't know why, and even though his father would strap his ass if he did.

Jimmy shrugged. "He was smarter than them. He scared them because he knew so much stuff."

"Smart stuff!" Dave Boyle said. "Right, Jimmy?"

Right, Jimmy? Right, Jimmy? Dave was like a parrot some days.

Sean wondered how much anyone could know about candy and why that information would be important. “What kind of stuff?”

“How to run the place better.” Jimmy didn’t sound real sure and then he shrugged. “Stuff, anyway. Important stuff.”

“Oh.”

“How to *run* the place. Right, Jimmy?”

Jimmy dug in the cement some more. Dave Boyle found his own stick and bent over the soft cement, began drawing a circle. Jimmy frowned and tossed his own stick aside. Dave stopped drawing, looked at Jimmy like, What’d I do?

“Know what would be cool?” Jimmy’s voice had that slight rise in it that made something in Sean’s blood jitter, probably because Jimmy’s idea of cool was usually way different than anyone else’s.

“What?”

“Driving a car.”

“Yeah,” Sean said slowly.

“You know”—Jimmy held his palms out, the twig and cement forgotten —“just around the block.”

“Just around the block,” Sean said.

“It would be cool, wouldn’t it?” Jimmy grinned.

Sean felt a smile curl up and break wide across his face. “It would be cool.”

“It would be, like, cooler’n anything.” Jimmy jumped a foot off the ground. He raised his eyebrows at Sean and jumped again.

“It’d be cool.” Sean could already feel the big wheel in his hand.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Jimmy punched Sean’s shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Sean punched Jimmy’s shoulder, something rippling inside him, racing, everything getting fast and shiny.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Dave said, but his punch missed Jimmy’s shoulder.

For a moment, Sean had even forgotten Dave was there. That happened a lot with Dave. Sean didn’t know why.

“Fucking serious fucking cool.” Jimmy laughed and jumped again.

And Sean could see it was already beginning to happen. They were in the front seat (Dave in the back, if he was there at all) and moving, two eleven-year-olds driving around Buckingham, tooting the horn at their friends, drag-racing the older kids on Dunboy Avenue, laying rubber in screeching clouds of smoke. He could smell the air rushing through the window, feel it in his hair.

Jimmy looked up the street. “You know anyone on this street who leaves their keys in their car?”

Sean did. Mr. Griffin left them under the seat, and Dottie Fiore left them in her glove compartment, and Old Man Makowski, the drunk who listened to Sinatra records too loud all hours of the day and night, left them in the ignition most times.

But as he followed Jimmy’s gaze and picked out the cars that he knew held keys, Sean felt a dull ache grow behind his eyes, and in the hard sunlight bouncing off the trunks and hoods, he could feel the weight of the street, its homes, the entire Point and its expectations for him. He was not a kid who stole cars. He was a kid who’d go to college someday, make something of himself that was bigger and better than a foreman or a truck loader. That was the plan, and Sean believed that plans worked out if you were careful, if you were cautious. It was like sitting through a movie, no matter how boring or confusing, until the end. Because at the end, sometimes things were explained or the ending itself was cool enough that you felt like sitting through all the boring stuff had been worth it.

He almost said this to Jimmy, but Jimmy was already moving up the street, looking in car windows, Dave running alongside him.

“How about this one?” Jimmy put his hand on Mr. Carlton’s Bel Air, and his voice was loud in the dry breeze.

“Hey, Jimmy?” Sean walked toward him. “Maybe some other time. Right?”

Jimmy’s face went all saggy and narrow. “What do you mean? We’ll do it. It’ll be fun. Fucking cool. Remember?”

“Fucking cool,” Dave said.

“We can’t even see over the dashboard.”

“Phone books.” Jimmy smiled in the sunlight. “We’ll get ’em from your house.”

“Phone books,” Dave said. “Yeah!”

Sean held out his arms. “No. Come on.”

Jimmy’s smile died. He looked at Sean’s arms as if he wanted to cut them off at the elbows. “Why won’t you just do something for fun. Huh?” He tugged on the handle of the Bel Air, but it was locked. For a second, Jimmy’s cheeks jiggled and his lower lip trembled, and then he looked in Sean’s face with a wild loneliness that Sean pitied.

Dave looked at Jimmy and then at Sean. His arm shot out awkwardly and hit Sean’s shoulder. “Yeah, how come you don’t want to do fun things?”

Sean couldn’t believe Dave had just hit him. Dave.

He punched Dave in the chest, and Dave sat down.

Jimmy pushed Sean. “What the hell you doing?”

“He hit me,” Sean said.

“He didn’t hit you,” Jimmy said.

Sean’s eyes widened in disbelief and Jimmy’s mimicked them.

“He hit me.”

“He hit me,” Jimmy said in a girl’s voice, and pushed Sean again. “He’s my fucking friend.”

“So am I,” Sean said.

“So am I,” Jimmy said. “So am I, so am I, so am I.”

Dave Boyle stood up and laughed.

Sean said, “Cut it out.”

“Cut it out, cut it out, cut it out.” Jimmy pushed Sean again, the heels of his hands digging into Sean’s ribs. “Make me. You wanna make me?”

“You wanna make him?” And now Dave shoved Sean.

Sean had no idea how this had happened. He couldn’t even remember what had made Jimmy mad anymore or why Dave had been stupid enough to hit him in the first place. One second they were standing by the car. Now they were in the middle of the street and Jimmy was pushing him, his face screwed up and stunted, his eyes black and small, Dave starting to join in.

“Come on. Make me.”

“I don’t—”

Another shove. “Come on, little girl.”

“Jimmy, can we just—?”

“No, we can’t. You a little pussy, Sean? Huh?”

He went to shove him again but stopped, and that wild (and tired, Sean could see that, too, suddenly) aloneness pummeled his features as he looked past Sean at something coming up the street.

It was a dark brown car, square and long like the kind police detectives drove, a Plymouth or something, and its bumper stopped by their legs and the two cops looked out through the windshield at them, their faces watery in the reflected trees that swam across the glass.

Sean felt a sudden lurch in the morning, a shifting in the softness of it.

The driver got out. He looked like a cop—blond crew cut, red face, white shirt, black-and-gold nylon tie, the heft of his gut dropping over his belt buckle like a stack of pancakes. The other one looked sick. He was skinny and tired-looking and stayed in his seat, one hand gripping his skull through greasy black hair, staring into the side-view mirror as the three boys came around near the driver's door.

The beefy one crooked a finger at them, then wiggled it toward his chest until they stood in front of him. "Let me ask you something, okay?" He bent at his big belly and his huge head filled Sean's vision. "You guys think it's okay to fight in the middle of the street?"

Sean noticed a gold badge clipped to the belt buckle beside the big man's right hip.

"What's that?" The cop cupped a hand behind his ear.

"No, sir."

"No, sir."

"No, sir."

"A pack of punks, huh? That what you are?" He jerked his big thumb back at the man in the passenger seat. "Me and my partner, we've had our fill of you East Bucky punks scaring decent people off the street. You know?"

Sean and Jimmy didn't say anything.

"We're sorry," Dave Boyle said, and looked like he was about to cry.

"You kids from this street?" the big cop asked. His eyes scanned the homes on the left side of the street like he knew every occupant, would bag them if they lied.

"Yup," Jimmy said, and looked back over his shoulder at Sean's house.

"Yes, sir," Sean said.

Dave didn't say anything.

The cop looked down at him. "Huh? You say something, kid?"

"What?" Dave looked at Jimmy.

"Don't look at him. Look at me." The big cop breathed loudly through his nostrils. "You live here, kid?"

"Huh? No."

"No?" The cop bent over Dave. "Where you live, son?"

"Rester Street." Still looking at Jimmy.

"Flats trash in the Point?" The cop's cherry-red lips swiveled as if he were sucking a lollipop. "That can't be good for business, can it?"

"Sir?"

"Your mother home?"

"Yes, sir." A tear fell down Dave's cheek and Sean and Jimmy looked away.

"Well, we're going to have a talk with her, tell her what her punk kid's been up to."

“I don’t…I don’t…” Dave blubbered.

“Get in.” The cop opened up the back door and Sean caught a whiff of apples, a sharp, October scent.

Dave looked at Jimmy.

“Get in,” the cop said. “Or you want I should throw the cuffs on you?”

“I—”

“*What?*” The cop sounded pissed now. He slapped the top of the open door. “Get the fuck inside.”

Dave climbed into the backseat, bawling.

The cop pointed a stubby finger at Jimmy and Sean. “Go tell your mothers what you been up to. And don’t let me catch you shits fighting on my streets again.”

Jimmy and Sean stepped back, and the cop hopped in his car and drove off. They watched it reach the corner and then turn right, Dave’s head, darkened by distance and shadows, looking back at them. And then the street was empty again, seemed to have gone mute with the slam of the car door. Jimmy and Sean stood where the car had been, looked at their feet, up and down the street, anywhere but at each other.

Sean got that lurching sensation again, this time accompanied by the taste of dirty pennies in his mouth. His stomach felt as if a spoon had hollowed it out.

Then Jimmy said it:

“You started it.”

“He started it.”

“You did. Now he’s screwed. His mother’s soft in the head. No telling what she’ll do two cops bring him home.”

“I didn’t start it.”

Jimmy pushed him, and Sean pushed back this time, and then they were on the ground, rolling around, punching each other.

“Hey!”

Sean rolled off Jimmy and they both stood up, expecting to see the two cops again but seeing Mr. Devine instead, coming down the front steps toward them.

“The hell you two doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.” Sean’s father frowned as he reached the sidewalk. “Get out of the middle of the street.”

They reached the sidewalk beside him.

“Weren’t there three of you?” Mr. Devine looked up the street. “Where’s Dave?”

“What?”

“Dave.” Sean’s father looked at Sean and Jimmy. “Wasn’t Dave with you?”

“We were fighting in the street.”

“What?”

“We were fighting in the street and the cops came.”

“When was this?”

“Like five minutes ago.”

“Okay. So, the cops came.”

“And they picked Dave up.”

Sean’s father looked up and down the street again. “They what? They picked him up?”

“To take him home. I lied. I said I lived here. Dave said he lived in the Flats, and they—”

“What are you talking about? Sean, what’d the cops look like?”

“Huh?”

“Were they wearing uniforms?”

“No. No, they—”

“Then how’d you know they were cops?”

“I didn’t. They…”

“They what?”

“He had a badge,” Jimmy said. “On his belt.”

“What kind of badge?”

“Gold?”

“Okay. But what’d it say on it?”

“Say?”

“The words. Were there words you could read?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“Billy?”

They all looked up at Sean's mother standing on the porch, her face tight and curious.

"Hey, honey? Call the police station, all right? See if any detectives would have picked up a kid for fighting on this street."

"A kid."

"Dave Boyle."

"Oh, Jesus. His mother."

"Let's hold off on that. Okay? Let's just see what the police say. Right?"

Sean's mother went back inside. Sean looked at his father. He didn't seem to know where to put his hands. He put them in his pockets, then he pulled them out, wiped them on his pants. He said, "I'll be damned," very softly, and he looked down to the end of the street as if Dave hovered at the corner, a dancing mirage just beyond Sean's field of vision.

"It was brown," Jimmy said.

"What?"

"The car. It was dark brown. Like a Plymouth, I think."

"Anything else?"

Sean tried to picture it, but he couldn't. He could see it only as something that had blocked his vision, not entered it. It had obscured Mrs. Ryan's orange Pinto and the lower half of her hedges, but Sean couldn't see the car itself.

"It smelled like apples," he said.

"What?"

"Like apples. The car smelled like apples."

“It smelled like apples,” his father said.

AN HOUR LATER, in Sean’s kitchen, two other cops asked Sean and Jimmy a bunch of questions, and then a third guy showed up and drew sketches of the men in the brown car based on what Jimmy and Sean told them. The big blond cop looked meaner on the sketch pad, his face even bigger, but otherwise it was him. The second guy, the one who’d kept his eyes on the side-view, didn’t look much like anything at all, a blur with black hair really, because Sean and Jimmy couldn’t remember him too well.

Jimmy’s father showed up and stood in the corner of the kitchen looking mad and distracted, his eyes watery, weaving a bit as if the wall kept moving behind him. He didn’t speak to Sean’s father, and no one spoke to him. With his usual capacity for sudden movement muted, he seemed smaller to Sean, less real somehow, like if Sean looked away he’d look back to find him dissolved into the wallpaper.

After they’d gone over it four or five times, everyone left—the cops, the guy who’d drawn on the pad, Jimmy and his father. Sean’s mother went into her bedroom and shut the door, and Sean could hear muffled crying a few minutes later.

He sat out on the porch and his father told him he hadn’t done anything wrong, that he and Jimmy were smart not to have gotten in that car. His father patted his knee and said things would turn out fine. Dave will be home tonight. You’ll see.

His father shut up then. He sipped his beer and sat with Sean, but Sean could feel he’d drifted away on him, was maybe in the back bedroom with Sean’s mother, or down in the cellar building his birdhouses.

Sean looked up the street at the rows of cars, the shiny glint of them. He told himself that this—all of this—was part of some plan that made sense. He just couldn’t see it yet. He would someday, though. The adrenaline that had been rushing through his body since Dave had been driven away and he and Jimmy had rolled on the street fighting finally flushed out through his pores like waste.

He saw the place where he, Jimmy, and Dave Boyle had fought by the Bel Air and he waited for the new hollow spaces formed as the adrenaline had left his body to fill back in. He waited for the plan to re-form and make sense. He waited and watched the street and felt its hum and waited some more until his father stood up and they went back inside.

JIMMY WALKED BACK to the Flats behind the old man. The old man weaved slightly and smoked his cigarettes down to pinched ends and talked to himself under his breath. When they got home, his father might give him a beating, might not, it was too close to tell. After he'd lost his job, he'd told Jimmy never to go to the Devines' house again, and Jimmy figured he'd have to pay up for breaking that rule. But maybe not today. His father had that sleepy drunkenness about him, the kind that usually meant he would sit at the kitchen table when they got home and drink until he fell asleep with his head on his arms.

Jimmy kept a few steps behind him, just in case, though, and tossed the ball up into the air, caught it in the baseball glove he'd stolen from Sean's house while the cops had been saying their good-byes to the Devines and nobody had even said a word to Jimmy and his father as they'd headed down the hallway toward the front door. Sean's bedroom door had been open, and Jimmy'd seen the glove lying on the floor, ball wrapped inside, and he'd reached in and picked it up, and then he and his father were through the front door. He had no idea why he'd stolen the glove. It wasn't for the wink of surprised pride he'd seen in the old man's eyes when he'd picked it up. Fuck that. Fuck him.

It had something to do with Sean hitting Dave Boyle and pussying out on stealing the car and some other things over the year they'd been friends, that feeling Jimmy got that whatever Sean gave him—baseball cards, half a candy bar, whatever—came in the form of a handout.

When Jimmy had first picked up the glove and walked away with it, he'd felt elated. He'd felt great. A little later, as they were crossing Buckingham Avenue, he'd felt that familiar shame and embarrassment that came whenever he stole something, an anger at whatever or whoever made

him do these things. Then a little later, as they walked down Crescent and into the Flats, he felt a stab of pride as he looked at the shitty three-deckers and then the glove in his hand.

Jimmy took the glove and he felt bad about it. Sean would miss it. Jimmy took the glove and he felt good about it. Sean would miss it.

Jimmy watched his father stumble ahead of him, the old fuck looking like he'd crumple and turn into a puddle of himself any second, and he hated Sean.

He hated Sean and he'd been dumb to think they could have been friends, and he knew he'd hold on to this glove for the rest of his life, take care of it, never show it to anyone, and he'd never, not once, use the goddamn thing. He'd die before that happened.

Jimmy looked at the Flats spread out before him as he and the old man walked under the deep shade of the el tracks and neared the place where Crescent bottomed out and the freight trains rumbled past the old, ratty drive-in and the Penitentiary Channel beyond, and he knew—deep, deep in his chest—that they'd never see Dave Boyle again. Where Jimmy lived, on Rester, they stole things all the time. Jimmy had had his Big Wheel stolen when he was four, his bike when he was eight. The old man had lost a car. And his mother had started hanging clothes inside to dry after so many had been ripped off the line in the backyard. You felt different when something was stolen as opposed to simply misplaced. You felt it in your chest that it was never coming back. That's how he felt about Dave. Maybe Sean, right now, was feeling that way about his baseball glove, standing over the empty space on the floor where it had been, knowing, beyond logic, that it was never, ever, coming back.

Too bad, too, because Jimmy had liked Dave, although he couldn't put his finger on why most times. Just something about the kid, maybe the way he'd always been there, even if half the time you didn't notice him.