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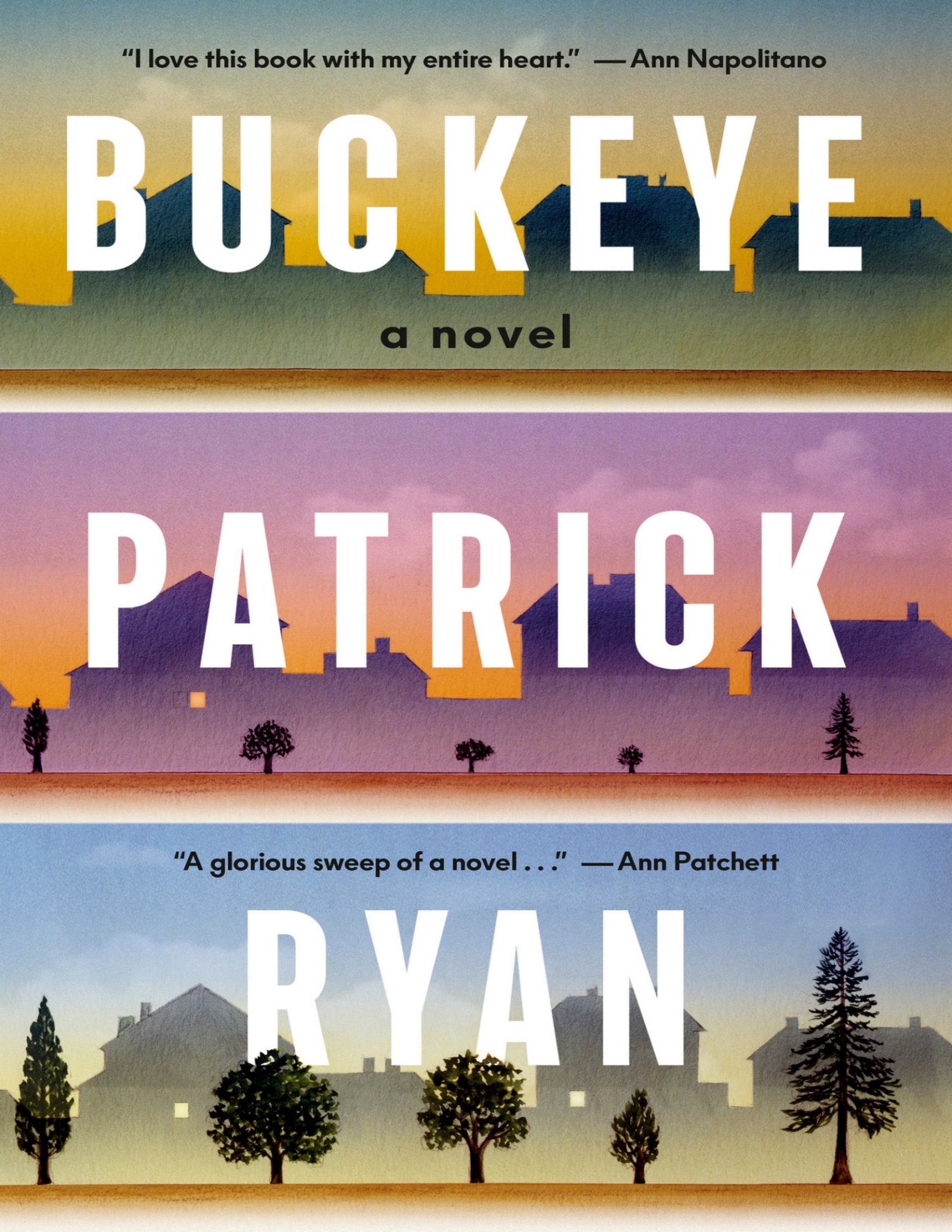

By Patrick Ryan

Send Me

The Dream Life of Astronauts

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BUCKEYE

PATRICK RYAN

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contents

To Ann and Karl VanDevender

PART I

chapter one

Cal Jenkins was born in the spring of 1920 with one leg shorter than the other. Just two inches shorter, but that was enough to make plenty of things difficult. Balancing on a bicycle took twice as long for him to learn as it did for other kids. Track and field was out of the question. So was walking without a pronounced limp or going up and down a set of stairs without securing himself on the railing—until his father, amateur carpenter and junk collector, improved Cal's condition by carving a new, thicker sole out of tire rubber and nailing it onto his left shoe. At school, boys made fun of the way Cal walked, then made fun of the shoe with the extra-thick sole (someone noticed within an hour of the first day he wore it). But one boy—flush-cheeked and small for his age—pulled Cal aside during morning assembly and told him he was unique in God's eyes. "I know," the boy said, "because I am too. I can't touch my toes, you see. I have unusually tight hamstrings." He bent over to demonstrate, and his fingertips barely reached his kneecaps. "We're each meant for a special thing," the boy said, and when Cal asked what his special thing was, the boy shrugged and said the two of them would have to wait to find out.

What they found out—separately, and years later, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and threw the country into a panic, after young men stopped waiting for their numbers to be drawn and began to volunteer—was that having one leg two inches shorter than the other was enough to make a person unfit for military service, while having unusually tight hamstrings wasn't. That boy, Sean Robison, was sent from Ohio to Mississippi for basic training, and was then sent to Tunisia, and from Tunisia to Sicily, and from Sicily to Germany, where he was shot through the neck in the Hürtgen

Forest while reloading his rifle and reciting the Lord's Prayer. Cal remained in his hometown and got a job in a concrete plant. He read comic books and adventure novels into his twenties. He married a local girl named Becky and eventually went to work in her father's hardware store. Sometimes he wondered if he would ever discover what his "special thing" was—his purpose, he'd decided—especially in the face of a world war that wouldn't have him. He was so conscious of not being overseas that he found his limp worsening all by itself. He told people about his leg, people who hadn't asked and didn't care. Sometimes he even pointed to his shoes, ordered now from a medical supply company in Dayton. "My condition causes hip problems," he'd say. Which was true, though he had yet to experience any.

Bonhomie had been founded in a northwest pocket of Ohio in 1857 by a small group of merchants and their families, on land transformed by the Last Ice Age, when a glacier nudged its way down from Canada and melted, creating not only Niagara Falls and the Great Lakes, but also a vast swamp across the top of Ohio and Indiana that took thirty years to drain and left behind soil densely ripe for farming. The town was built with local lumber, shale, and limestone, and with granite from North Carolina, marble from Vermont and Colorado, and steel from Pennsylvania—all of it brought in by rail. For a time, the town was a grid of nine streets, four running north–south and five east–west. The population grew from within as much as it could manage, and from without as much as it needed to. It swelled with migrant workers and their families during harvest time—corn and wheat and tomatoes and sugar beets—and shrank again when the workers moved on. Others moved into the area for the jobs created by the factories that sprang up around Hancock County. Immigrants from Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and many other countries were processed through Ellis Island and absorbed by the cities and towns of the east, though some went west—and some of those stopped and settled down in Bonhomie, which seemed as good a place as any. Over time, the original grid became known as downtown, and what wasn't downtown became known as neighborhoods. Not sections, which would have suggested clear dividing lines and the need for those lines, but general neighborhoods that took

shape as people found their people. There were well-to-do neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods, and there were all the neighborhoods in between. There was a neighborhood called Tiller's Flat, where several Mexican families and nearly all the Black families in town—less than a dozen—lived, many of whom had moved from the South for the industry jobs (and to get away from the South). There was a neighborhood of apartment buildings and bungalows called Chesterton that was made up mostly of migrant families from out west, and a neighborhood situated between the two synagogues that was thought of as mostly Jewish. When people wanted an Irish neighborhood to point to, they could always refer to the block with St. Catherine's and Good Shepherd School as Vatican City. And scattered throughout these neighborhoods were all the people who didn't think they belonged to any group, most of them Protestant.

By the time the U.S. got into the Second World War, the population of Bonhomie had topped six thousand. The town had its own police force, fire department, and vocational college. It had two dozen restaurants (if you counted coffee shops and soda fountains), five banks, four dry cleaners, two record stores, and a movie house. Industry thrived in and around town, such as J & J Concrete, Tuck & Sons Aluminum, and the Mid-American Canning Company; and industry died, such as Ingleton's Fizzy Pops, Dilco's Feed & Supplements, and the Hancock Bell & Skillet Company. There was a horseshoe-shaped lake with a fetch of a quarter mile just south of town off Route 18. To the north, where the exit ramp off Cooper Road fed onto Highway 23, the neon Tuck & Sons tulip—twenty feet in diameter, pink and flat as a stencil—stood atop a hundred-foot pole, visible for miles. A rusted grain elevator still bearing the checkered Purina logo loomed like a monolith at the east end of Main Street. Passenger and cargo trains came through town day and night, and some of them stopped to deposit or collect people and mail and goods, but most of them bypassed the railyard and the station and town altogether.

Bonhomie wasn't nearly so small that everyone knew everyone else, but it was small enough that, sooner or later, most everyone felt as if they'd laid eyes on most everyone else. Since the start of the war, fewer and fewer

young men were seen on Main Street. Meanwhile, there was no shortage of old-timers—fifty and up—who'd fought in the last big war. One who'd lost an arm and wore his sleeve pinned, another who got around on wooden crutches because one of his legs had been blown off just below the knee. Cal's own father had been awarded a Purple Heart for taking a bullet through his shoulder while pulling a wounded officer into a foxhole in the Meuse–Argonne—though the medal was not to be seen in his increasingly cluttered house and he didn't want to talk about his war days.

Cal was astounded by the impact two inches of leg could have on a person. Being deprived of those inches, he'd gained what seemed to be a full and healthy life. But feeling happy about it didn't seem right—not when a million young men were inducted during the first year America got into World War II, and ten million by early May of 1945. That Tuesday morning, Cal had just opened Hanover Hardware on Sutton Street and was sitting on a stool behind the counter, sorting a box of washers, when a woman walked in and asked if he had a radio.

Her forehead was high and her red hair was done up in Victory Rolls. Her mint-green dress and matching pillbox hat, her white gloves, and her coral lipstick suggested money to Cal. Her eyes latched on to his as she crossed the linoleum floor. He told her yes, the store had a Zenith, but it wasn't for sale; it was in the office. She asked where the office was. "Basement," Cal said, nodding toward the stairs just past the end of the counter, and without another word she walked past him—right past the handwritten sign that read EMPLOYEES ONLY—and started down the stairs.

"Ma'am?" Cal said. He dropped the washers into the box and followed her.

The basement was used mostly for overstock—though there hadn't been much to store in the past few years, with production focused on the war effort. Cal caught up with her as she made her way between two tall sets of half-empty shelves. He indicated the area in the corner that the store's owner, his father-in-law, Roman Hanover, had designated as the office.

Across from the cot where Roman took his naps was a pint-size desk where they did paperwork and where Cal ate his lunch, listened to radio

programs, and read adventure novels. He was currently halfway through *The Bold Buccaneer*. He tugged on the string for the overhead bulb, and in its glow he noticed the deep jade of her eyes and saw how pronounced her cheekbones were, giving her face a V shape over the smooth stem of her neck. She was beautiful, he realized. But she looked agitated, impatient. She motioned toward the radio with one of her gloved hands. "Why isn't it on?"

He switched on the Zenith, surfed the wheeze and static for whatever she was hoping to hear, and within seconds he found it: Truman, informing the country that Germany had surrendered to the Allied forces. It was the announcement everyone had been anticipating. Hitler had been dead for a week. The Nazis had surrendered the Netherlands to the British five days earlier. Still, the news was breathtaking. Through the hopper window that opened onto the street they heard shouts and whistles. A car horn tap-tap-tapping. Then another, and another.

"Jeez," Cal said. "Can you imagine what it's like in Berlin right now? I probably would've been there, if it weren't for…" He wobbled his shoe with the extra-thick sole.

But she was looking at the caramel-colored radio. Her eyes were glistening. "Do you think—" she said, then paused as if unsure of what she wanted to ask him. She took a breath. "Do you think people will start coming home?"

"From Europe? I hope so. But Hirohito's still giving us a run. They might send those guys over to the Pacific."

The woman blinked against the sting in her eyes and, as Truman continued talking, looked at this hardware store clerk who, when he'd been sitting behind the counter, had been almost handsome with his gray-blue eyes, his wavy blond hair that looked as if he'd just raked his fingers through it, his narrow jaw, and an early set of lines framing his mouth. Now that she could see all of him, he was still almost handsome but in a different way. He wasn't very tall, and his stance was off, his hips pitched at an almost uncomfortable-looking angle. His gold-and-black-striped tie was tucked between two buttons halfway down the front of his oxford shirt and

looked wrong that way; she wanted to pluck it out. Instead, she took him by his shoulders, pulled him toward her, and kissed him.

Cal would have gasped if his lips weren't against hers. They kissed until Truman finished speaking. When they stepped back, she turned off the radio. He heard her sniffle, offered her his handkerchief. She touched it to the outside corners of her eyes as she glanced at the cot and pint-size desk, the brown bag with the apple beside it, the library book with the swashbuckling cover. "Does a child live down here?"

"*No*—" Cal couldn't account for the alarm in his voice. The awkwardness of their proximity, maybe. Now that the announcement was over, they had no reason to be in the basement. "This is just where we do the invoicing and ordering, and—"

She said, "I'm Margaret, by the way. Salt, like the shaker."

"Cal Jenkins."

They shook hands—and smiled at how formal that felt, given what had just happened between them.

"I should go," Margaret said.

He followed her back upstairs, his shoes clomping unevenly. She told him she'd been walking down the street and had noticed people rushing to their cars, everyone switching on their radios, she could tell something was happening but hadn't known whom to approach. She thanked him, then ran her eyes over the shelves, the endcap displays. "I've lived in this town for almost six years and I've never been in here once."

Cal just nodded, thinking, I would've remembered you.

He watched through the front window as she made her way up the sidewalk. Car horns were still sounding off. A boy had climbed onto the mailbox across the street and was making a bullhorn with his hands, broadcasting the surrender. Cal ought to call home, he knew, see if Becky had the radio on. She would want to know, even if she wouldn't want to talk to him. He dragged the back of his hand across his mouth and spotted a smear of coral lipstick on his thumb, astounded all over again by what had just happened. As long as he remained standing at this window, he told

himself, as long as Margaret Salt was still in his sight, he was still the guy who'd had to wipe a beautiful stranger's coral lipstick off his face.

She turned the corner onto Durbin Street and was gone.

—

Three and a half years earlier, one look at *Jenkins, Calvin M.* had told the Army doctor all he needed to know. Barefoot, Cal was unable to stand completely straight or even hold his shoulders level. "Try the Citizens Defense Corps," the doctor said. "I'm sure they can use you." It was January of 1942, less than a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Bonhomie recruitment center was full of symmetrical young men waiting to enlist.

"Would I get a uniform?"

Someone behind Cal snickered.

"An armband, I think," the doctor said. "Thanks for coming in, son. Get dressed and go on home." He wrote something on Cal's card, stamped it, and handed it to the nurse for final processing.

But Cal had gotten the afternoon off from the concrete plant for this, not knowing how long it would take, and he was living in a single room-with-kitchenette in Mrs. Gautier's creaky Queen Anne on Third Street—not exactly a place where he wanted to sit around and sulk. He steered his chalk-red Nash through the snowy streets to Paulson's Food Market, instead, and bought groceries with his father's ration book, then drove them out to the old man.

The acre of land just west of town and the yellow, two-story house that stood on it hardly resembled the place where Cal had grown up. His brother, Robert, had died of influenza when Cal was six; his sister, Grace, of tuberculosis when he was nine. Also that year his mother, Dora, of several ailments but mostly pneumonia. That had left just Cal and his father, and Cal had moved out as soon as he turned eighteen. It was hard to know what shape the house and the old man might have been in if it weren't for the war —not the current war, the one before it—and all the unrelated death in the

family that had come after, and all the drinking that fueled his father's hardship. There was a willful out-of-reachness to Everett now that seemed to deepen with his pitted cheeks, an appetite for suspicion and a compulsion for stockpiling that became more ravenous with each passing year—all of which made it a good thing the house wasn't in town. On a regular basis, Everett was seen pedaling his cart through the streets of Bonhomie and stopping to pull items out of dumpsters and trash cans. Now and then, someone hollered at him or complained to the town. More than a few times, a .22 was fired at a passing car from one of his attic windows and a deputy had to be sent out, the old crackpot on Compton Road was at it again.

The trouble was the way his father's brain worked, Cal thought. The trouble was also all the *stuff*. Everett had just barely managed to scrape his family's way through the Depression and couldn't abide by waste. He kept clothes from decades past—his own and what he found. He kept food he was never going to eat, food that had gone bad. He kept magazines, newspapers, calendars, can labels. Buttons, matchbooks, pencil stubs. The skulls of rabbits and squirrels he'd shot and eaten. Spools of thread and coils of rope and wire. Cast-iron skillets and rejected bells and clappers from the defunct bell factory. He kept every make and manner of kitchen utensil he'd found by rummaging through the town dump or through other people's garbage cans. He kept envelopes, catalogues, birthday cards sent to strangers. He maintained no liquor cabinet, but stationed (and hidden) around the house were bottles of all kinds of booze he'd bought or found or been given as payment for some odd job. In the backyard were five Model Ts, none of them drivable. They'd become receptacles for empty cans and mason jars, for scrap wood and car parts. One car—rolled off the assembly line the year Cal was born—had been turned into a chicken coop.

The old man was sixty-one, had lived under fourteen presidents (six from Ohio), and, though his vision was teeming with floaters and cataracts, he'd been writing letters to all of them since Woodrow Wilson. He had no interest in barbers, cut his own hair, let his graying beard grow wide and wiry. He was thin; if you were to encounter him naked, you would see his

bones poking to get out, not because of any ailment but because food was an afterthought to him now that he lived alone.

He was in the backyard when he heard Cal's tires roll onto the gravel driveway. He heard the engine shut off and, a few moments later, he heard Cal's knock on the front door. Then footsteps rounding the side of the house, soft-shattering the thin layer of new snow that had frozen to a crust during the night.

"Pop?"

A cardinal drew a crimson line across the snow. There was Cal: standing between the pint-size Coca-Cola chest and the wardrobe. A sack of groceries under his arm.

"Ears working today, Pop?"

"Fine." Not fine since Saint-Mihiel, actually, but functional.

"If I didn't know better," Cal said, "I'd think you were getting fat. How many layers have you got on?"

Everett, who had on four jackets, two scarves, a mackinaw, and, under it all, a pair of pajamas, was dragging a wheel with a tire sagging around it toward the garage behind the house. In the few days since Cal had last stopped by, his father had somehow managed to raise each of the five Model Ts and remove all twenty of their wheels. The cars sat on jacks and stump cuts. The wheels and their flattened tires lay in a heap beside the garage, except for the one he was dragging through the snow. All of which suggested to Cal that at least his father hadn't been on a bender. "What are you doing?"

As if tired of having to answer that question (though he hadn't spoken to anyone since Cal's last visit), Everett, dragging the tire another few feet, said testily, "Keeping my rubber and metal out of certain clutches."

There were trails through the snow connecting each of the cars to where the wheels and tires now lay. "What clutches, Pop?"

"Institutional," Everett said without looking up at him. "Governmental. If you want it typed up, you'll have to wait till I have time." He let the tire fall over as he clapped snow off his gloves, powdering it onto his beard.

Cal nodded. "Guess I'll put these away."

He carried the groceries up the sagging back steps and into the mudroom, where he'd once sat on a bench to take off his shoes when he got home from school. The bench was buried under newspapers and catalogues now, tools and coats and blankets piled opposite it, so that the path through the mudroom was almost too narrow to walk. Then into the kitchen, where his mother, blond like him and his sister, had once cooked their meals and helped them with their homework and recited the capitals of the forty-eight states by heart. All but one of the chairs were piled with flats and boxes, the table so heaped with junk it was barely discernable as a table. The floor drooped in places and creaked wherever a foot could get to it. The ceiling was a stormfront of water stains. Everett had claimed to be glad when Cal, at the age of eighteen, told him he was moving out. He'd said he was sick and tired of Cal nagging him about the way they lived, about the condition of the house, and his drinking. Nagging, since Cal was eleven. Everett was right on the math; that was the year after Cal's mother had died, the year everything had somehow gotten worse. Cal couldn't shake the feeling that, out of the family, he was the last one his father would have wanted to be left with, and here the two of them were.

He stacked the groceries on the only free section of counter he could find, then filled the bag with things he'd brought in weeks past that had gone bad. Collapsed fruit. Rock-hard bread. A soft, slippery onion. He carried the stinking bag through the front door and out to the trunk of his car so his father wouldn't be able to dig through it after he was gone.

In the yard, Everett unwound the brass wire from the joined handles of the double garage doors and pulled the doors open, making wings in the snow. There wasn't enough room for twenty tires in there, he deduced, even flat ones; he'd have to pull a few things out, decide what could be sacrificed to thieves, should any come around while he was asleep or away. More than a few things, now that he thought of it, because he also had to make room for the soda chest, all the car parts, the cans, the flashing and lengths of stovepipe. Yes, every bit of metal and rubber visible to the naked eye had to be hidden away.

He was dragging a sideboard out of the garage when Cal reappeared.

“Let me help you.”

His father wagged his bearded head no.

“This wasn’t even ours,” Cal said, touching the wood.

Everett got the sideboard far enough out so the garage doors would clear it, then leaned his elbows on it and peered at Cal. His eyes bloodshot—maybe just with annoyance. “You came to bring me food?”

Cal nodded.

“And now you’ve brought it?”

“Yes.”

Everett shifted his mouth around as if trying to separate a bit of fish from a bone. “I’m busy.”

Cal took in the yard: a disorganized cemetery of crap, all of it covered with snow. From the driver’s seat of one of the Model Ts, a chicken raised its head and cast a sideways eye. “There are a lot of guys signing up at the recruitment center,” he said. “Volunteering. It’s something to see.”

“Mmm.”

“They’re lined up down Union Street.”

Everett tugged on one of the sideboard drawers. He banged it with his fist and tugged again. Empty.

“I wanted you to know—I tried to enlist this afternoon.”

For years, Everett had been bowing to gravity the way old men sometimes do. Now, right before Cal’s eyes, he appeared to straighten, grow taller, till his gray-blue eyes were level with Cal’s. “Why?”

“*Why?* Because I want to be a part of this thing, that’s why. Fight the Axis. You know what it’s like. *You* enlisted.”

Everett winced. “Listen to you. ‘Fight the Axis.’ And you didn’t ask me first?”

“I don’t need to ask, Pop. I’m twenty-one. I’ve been registered for three years.”

“Well, it was a waste of time. They didn’t take you, did they? Because of your leg?”

“No.”

Everett's posture deflated again. He worked open the second drawer of the sideboard, looked in, shoved it closed. "Meanwhile, they've bumped the registration age up to sixty-four. They'd probably take *me* tomorrow, but they turned you down. Isn't that a kick in the teeth?"

Cal slipped his hands into his pockets. "Anyway, I tried."

"You shouldn't have bothered. I keep writing to that son of a bitch in the White House. I keep telling him I see right through him, right through this whole goddamn mess. If we cut off Japan's oil, I said, Japan'll come after us. But you know what? He *wanted* them to come after us, because he couldn't wait to get us into this thing. He just about puts the whole Navy in one port, and now we've got more than two thousand men dead. Some of them didn't even have time to put their pants on." Everett leaned sideways and spat. "The day you were born and one of your legs come up short, the doctor said you were healthy except for the deformity and right then I thought, well, that's it. If we get into another big one, he'll never be in it."

Wanting to put space between himself and his father, and the word *deformity,* Cal said, "All right, Pop, I'll see you in about a week," and started toward his car.

"Hey," Everett called. A moment later: "Goddammit, stop!"

Cal kept walking. How poorly thought-out this entire day had been. When would he learn? When would he stop trying to impress the old crank? He reached the Nash and was opening the driver's door when something smacked hard against the back of his coat.

A snowball, it turned out. Shaped and hardened by tired, arthritic hands. Everett stood several feet away, huffing from having moved so quickly, his breath crystallizing in front of him. He said, "I'm *glad,* is what I'm trying to tell you."

—

The next day, Cal considered growing a beard. He considered moving to a new town where nobody knew him and going by his middle name, *Maurice Jenkins, glad to meet you,* all for the sake of being able to claim