

BENEATH

ROLAND SMITH

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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FOR MY WIFE, MARIE, WHO HAS ALWAYS
WANTED ME TO WRITE A CHRISTMAS STORY,
ALTHOUGH I REALIZE THAT THIS MAY NOT BE
THE STORY SHE HAD IN MIND

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Exactly one year to the day after my brother, Coop, ditched me, I got a package in the mail.

It came to the school, not our house.

The secretary handed me the package with a warning that I was never to use the school as my personal address.

I was going to tell her that I hadn't when I saw my name: Pat Meatloaf O'Toole, scrawled in Coop's familiar handwriting.

Meatloaf is not my real middle name.

I told her I would never do it again, grabbed the package, locked myself in a restroom stall, and tore the box open.

Inside was a handheld digital voice recorder, a supply of memory sticks, and a note written on a greasy hamburger wrapper:

Lil Bro, Pat, just turn the recorder to Play and I'll explain what you're supposed to do with this. DO NOT share with parents. This is just between you and me.

Your Big Bro, Coop

I made sure the restroom was empty and switched on the recorder.

Hey, Meatloaf, I know you're mad at me for splitting without so much as a good-bye, or a note, but opportunity knocked. I'm not sure what Mom and Dad told you, but while you were at school we had one of our discussions about my future. As usual, it was one-sided — a monologue, not a dialogue — and their plans for me did not include anything I was interested in doing . . . big surprise. So I packed my things and walked out the door while it was still open.

I would have called and explained, but you know my take on the whole phone thing. Then I was going to write you a letter, but the longer I waited the longer the letter got in my head. Pretty soon it was too long to write. Know what I mean? So I bought a second digital voice recorder exactly like the one I've been using in my travels and figured you and I could stay in touch on the little memory sticks that store the recordings.

And the truth is that I want to hear your voice, and I hope that you still want to hear mine. So consider this a slow-motion cell phone.

You'll be able to transcribe all this into one of those journals you're always scribbling in.

Epistolary. Remember that?

Now, memorize this address: PO Box 1611, New York, New York. Zip: 10011. This is where you can send the memory sticks when you figure out how to use the recorder. And it would be nice if you would respond soon so I know you got the recorder and that you're okay. Here's another address

you need to know: PO Box 912 at the post office on Elm Street. That's your private mailing address in McLean. You pass the post office every day on your way to and from school, so it shouldn't be a problem for you to pop in and check the mail. The PO box key is buried in the pot with the petunias Miss Flower planted in the backyard. I assume that Mom and Dad still haven't hired anyone to do any landscaping since the Flowers were fired. And I'm certain you haven't done any yard work, so the key should be there. Talk to you soon, Lil Bro.

Only Coop would think of something like this. That's how his mind works. But the recorder was a huge technological leap for him. I think this is the first electronic gadget he has ever owned.

The little recorder has a lot of functions. There's software with it too. I can edit the recordings, splice them together — like I'm doing now — then transcribe them in my journal.

A hybrid journal.

A collaboration with my brother.

The thumb switch on the side has five positions:

Play.

Fast-forward.

Rewind.

Record.

Erase.

Down the rabbit hole we go.

ONE

UP TOP

A LITTLE FAMILY HISTORY

... for my eyes . . . I mean, for my ears only . . . in order to practice with this recorder.

I don't think I'll send this to Coop, but I might change my mind if I don't sound too stupid.

My brother, John Cooper O'Toole, is five years older than me. And I'm not embarrassed to say that I have idolized Coop my entire life, from the day my baby blue eyes understood that the boy with curly brown hair, green eyes, and the idiotic grin always leaning over me was my brother.

I'm definitely not sending this to Coop . . .

Rewind . . .

I can get rid of the last words or . . .

Fast-forward . . .

Insert . . .

(I can insert things I forgot or want to clarify.)

Or I can keep it even though it sounds stupid, which I think I'll do . . .

Record . . .

Coop was not the child my parents expected.

I wasn't either.

But you don't get to pick your parents, and they don't get to pick you.

My parents *did* pick each other before Coop came along though, which is one of the unsolved mysteries of the universe.

Mom is an astrophysicist and former astronaut.

Dad is a molecular biologist and Nobel laureate.

Mom is always looking up. Dad is always looking down.

Neither of them looked at us much.

Mom wanted girls.

Dad didn't want kids at all.

Here's how Coop put it: With their combined DNA they expected filet mignon. When they opened the oven they got two pans of meatloaf.

Within months of Coop's abrupt departure, by mutual consent, my parents split up.

Mom is dating an old man with three young daughters.

Dad is dating a young woman with an old parrot.

WE ALL HAVE LITTLE QUIRKS

but Coop has more than most.

I think it's because he was born during a lunar eclipse.

December 24.

Christmas Eve.

Two weeks before he was supposed to pop out.

Dad raced Mom to the hospital and got snagged by the worst traffic jam on the 495 Beltway in Virginia history.

People simply stopped their cars in the middle of the highway to watch the sky.

Mom was furious.

But not at the motorists who decided to turn the highway into a parking lot.

It was the timing.

She wanted to see the eclipse just as badly as those who were blocking her.

Instead, she was lying on the backseat of their brand-new SUV in agony, trying to squeeze out her first child.

A boy.

Coop has a different take on his quirks.

Prior to his birth, Mom went on two space shuttle missions.

Coop believed that during the second mission . . . *something happened*. (He always whispered those last two words.) What *happened* was never explained.

From the day Coop was born he rarely slept at night.

The pediatrician assured my parents that Coop would outgrow this behavior.

The doctor was wrong.

Mom and Dad both worked, so they hired a full-time nanny to take care of him at night. And a second full-time nanny to watch him sleep during the day.

The nannies were sisters.

Identical twins.

Spinsters.

Camilla and Cecelia Flores, who didn't speak ten words of English between them. We called both of them Miss Flower because their last name was the Spanish word for *flowers*.

We suspected they switched shifts, covering for each other when necessary, sometimes working twenty-four hours in a row. It didn't matter to us because we couldn't tell them apart anyway — they were identical down to the moles on their upper right lips with three black hairs growing out of them. They were the same person split in two.

The Flowers taught Coop to flamenco dance when he was three years old.

By the time I came along he had switched to tap and never looked back.

Coop and I used to watch YouTube clips of the great tappers like the Nicholas Brothers, Leonard Reed, Honi Coles, Bojangles, Fred Astaire . . . Coop was as good if not better than all of them. He sometimes tapped for me and the

Flowers, but mostly he tapped by himself for himself. Several nights a week he'd drape his tap shoes around his neck, sneak out of the house, find a tunnel or highway underpass, and tap until dawn.

I asked him one time why he tapped.

"To keep my feet moving, Lil Bro," he answered. "You're not going anywhere if you don't keep 'em moving."

When I was nine and Coop was fourteen, Mom and Dad let the Flowers go. It was like losing two mothers at the same time. And it turned out to be a big mistake, because it left Coop and me on our own. But I'll get to that later.

Back to Coop's quirks . . .

He collects flashlights. (Hundreds of them from all over the world.)

He loves people but doesn't crave their company, sometimes staying in the house for weeks at a time. (I guess I better explain: Old people, young people, rich people, poor people, white, black, Hispanic, Muslim, Christian, whatever . . . he makes no distinctions. To him they are just people . . . none better, none worse than the other. I think people sense this in Coop, because they are attracted to him like moths are attracted to light. I don't know why this is. Something in the way he moves? Pheromones? I've seen complete strangers cross a busy street to talk to him. But the conversations are a little one-sided. Coop will nod, shake his head, frown, smile, and say only enough to keep them talking. When they walk

away Coop knows all about them, but they know virtually nothing about Coop.)

He has never worn a watch. (A minute, hour, day, or month are all the same to him.)

He has never sent or received an email.

He does not know how to drive a car.

He writes short letters to people he doesn't know on purple stationery in beautiful script and doesn't include a return address.

He does not talk on the phone. (Ever.)

He slept virtually all the way through school (and was late every day) but graduated with honors because he did his homework — at night — and turned in all of his assignments on time.

He was accepted to every university my parents filled out the applications to. He rejected all of them.

He has no close friends, yet everyone is his friend.

I thought that I was his best friend until he took off without telling me. I know that sounds whiny, but it hurt. I was really ticked off at him. It was worse than losing the Flowers. I was tempted to send a recording back consisting of just two words with an exclamation point. But that idea lasted about two seconds. I was too happy to hear from him to stay mad.

HERE ARE SOME OF COOP'S FAVORITE THINGS

Favorite activity: Three-way toss-up . . . tapping, reading, writing.

Favorite book: Another toss-up . . . *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, written in 1897, and *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, written by Jules Verne in 1864.

He must have read both of these books a dozen times. And he read them to me when I was eight, giving me nightmares for months. Especially *Dracula*. Coop assured me that there were no such things as vampires. He said that the reason the novel had so much effect on me was because Stoker had chosen to write it in a style so realistic the story appeared to be fact. The technique is called epistolary, from the Latin *epistola*, meaning letter. The author uses fictitious diaries, letters, and newspaper articles to tell the story. But the nightmares continued, and bats still creep me out. What does an eight-year-old know, or care, about epistolary novels?

Just think what Stoker could have done with a digital voice recorder and email.

This is what I'm doing here in this journal . . . stringing together bits and pieces of information to make a story, each bead in the necklace made from different material.

Memory beads. Recorded beads. Newspaper beads. Letter beads . . .

Coop got me hooked on keeping a journal. He gave me my first one and said I should keep a diary and never let anyone read it, including him. He said showing someone your diary was like offering someone a slice of your soul. “Too many slices, Meatloaf, and pretty soon the plate is empty. No soul food left, Lil Bro.”

Which reminds me . . .

Favorite food: Tuna fish sandwiches.

Favorite drink: Water.

Favorite quote: “Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!” (Count Dracula to Jonathan Harker when the wolves howl outside the castle on Jonathan’s first night there.)

Favorite music: Anything with drums.

Favorite smell: Freshly turned dirt.

Which brings me to . . .

THE GREAT TUNNEL DISASTER

as it became known, started the day after the Flowers were dismissed. (Or *weeded*, as Coop put it.)

I'm not talking about a little hole in the ground or a small cave. I'm talking about a real full-blown tunnel that any mining engineer would have been proud of. Coop must have been planning it for months, or even years. He had drawn up elaborate schematics and complicated mathematical equations. He had collected shovels, sledgehammers, picks, wheelbarrows, wooden posts for beams, planks for the walls and ceiling, scuba gear in case he ran out of air . . . all stored in the shed in back of the house, which neither of my parents ever went into.

I was recruited as his assistant engineer and conspirator after I swore on his favorite possession (his tap shoes) that I would not tell a living soul about his plan. It was easy to keep that promise because there really wasn't a plan. Plans have endings. Coop's tunnel only had a beginning hidden behind the shed.

Mom and Dad thought Coop was lazy and lacked drive. I guess they never took into account the time it took him to dig the tunnel, which authorities later determined was more than a mile long.

Coop was inside that muddy tube every single night, week

after week, for eight months. When he hit an obstacle he couldn't break through he would go around it, over it, under it — the tunnel slithering beneath the neighborhood like a giant earthworm.

His nightly routine was to wake up around eleven, eat a tuna fish sandwich, then walk across the backyard to the shed, where he would change into his digging clothes — my mom's yellow rain slicker and pants. It was cold in the tunnel and wet. When he finished digging for the night he'd rinse off the mud with a garden hose, dry himself with an old towel, change into his jeans and T-shirt, and sneak back into the house.

On school days I was Coop's alarm clock. My job was to get him out of the tunnel before my parents woke up. On weekends I joined him in the tunnel. My job was hauling buckets of dirt and dumping them into the wheelbarrow.

About four months into the project Coop broke through a wall of dirt and discovered a cavern.

"I knew it!" he shouted. "I knew there was something down here."

What he had discovered was his own tunnel from a month earlier, evidenced by the molding tuna sandwich inside the Ziploc bag lying on the tunnel floor. Somehow he had gone in a complete circle and bumped into his old lunch.

Coop kept digging.

The longer the tunnel became, the slower the progress. Every scoop of dirt had to be wheelbarrowed back to the entrance and dumped into the stream that ran down the gully

in back of our house. He started punching head-size holes in the surface every few nights to figure out where he was, hoping to find a closer dumping site.

One night a dog bit him on the nose.

Coop still kept digging.

A flashlight was fine for finding his way down the dark tunnel, but for digging he used a lantern. The fuel lasted a hundred times longer than batteries and was cheaper.

Coop found a second dump site about a quarter mile downstream from the shed and was once again making good progress on the tunnel. He had also discovered some artifacts: a handful of musket balls and a rusty bayonet he claimed were from the Civil War.

Spring break was a few weeks away, and a couple of months after that, school would be out.

“We’ll have the whole summer to dig,” he said. “Who knows what else we’ll find!”

On the last night of the project we found a gas line.

It was a Saturday morning a little after three.

The night before, Coop had bumped into the Mesas’ Olympic-size swimming pool and was digging along the side of it, hoping he had chosen the shortest way around. He was grunting so loudly in the confined space while he swung the pick he didn’t hear the hissing noise.

I was lying right behind him waiting for the next bucket of dirt.

“Do you hear that?” I asked.

“What?” Coop said, taking another swing with the pick.

“Do you smell that?”

“I don’t smell anything except my own sweat. The pool is heated, and the wall is warm.” He moved the lantern to a better position. “I can hardly wait until we get around this thing. I can’t believe I bumped into it. Of all the luck. At least we won’t have to shore up this side of the —”

Coop swore, then yelled, “Run!”

The tunnel was not tall enough to run in. I crawled on my hands and knees as fast as I could, with Coop’s head bumping into my rear. We were twenty yards from the second entrance when we heard the *wumpf!*

I didn’t see the fireball because Coop had straddled my back and covered my head with his body. The last thing I remember was feeling as if I was flying down a muddy rifle barrel like a musket ball with Coop hanging on to me.

I woke up in the hospital three days later. Mom was sitting next to my bed reading an article in the *Journal of Astrophysics* called “The Formation of Polar Disk Galaxies.”

“How’s Coop?” I asked.

“He is insane,” Mom answered.

Except for some burns and singed hair, Coop was fine.

The same could not be said for our neighborhood.

McLean is across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. Aside from former astronauts and Nobel laureates we have senators, CIA agents, Georgetown University professors, lobbyists, and other people, like the vice president’s daughter and her family, whose house is kitty-corner to ours.

Two hundred local, state, and federal law enforcement agents arrived within minutes of the explosion. They thought it was a terrorist attack.

It didn't take them long to figure out that it was only Coop. Every inch of his tunnel had collapsed, which led them directly to the shed in our backyard.

I missed everything after the fireball, but I heard about it after I came out of my coma.

The blast blew us right past the second entrance. Coop and I caught on fire, or at least our pants did, but we were put out by the water from the Mesas' swimming pool. Mostly.

Through all of it Coop hung on to me.

He dug us out of the collapsed tunnel with his bare, blistered hands, stopping every few seconds to blow air into my lungs.

He carried me across our back lawn to my waiting parents and several federal agents, looking like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Our pants were still smoking.

Dad took me.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation took Coop. They hustled him into the back of a black sedan and drove him away before anyone in the neighborhood saw him.

The whole thing was hushed up. The headline the next morning read: "Gas Line Explosion Scares McLean." I think our family was the only one who knew what really happened.

By the time I got out of the hospital, a couple of days after I regained consciousness, you wouldn't have known anything bad had happened in the neighborhood. The lawns had been repaired, the flowers replanted, and the five trees

that were knocked down were cut up and hauled away. The only thing still being worked on was the Mesas' pool. (They ended up having to replace it.)

Two FBI agents came by the house. An Agent Ryan did all the talking. She told us that in the interest of national security they were going to stick with the gas-line-explosion story. She said that people were already jumpy enough with all the terrorist threats. It wouldn't do anyone any good to know that a fourteen-year-old dug a mile-long tunnel and blew up a swath of one of the most secure neighborhoods in America.

(I'm probably violating some state secrets act by writing about it here.)

They let Coop go a few days after I got home.

His hands were wrapped in bandages.

He said they kept him in a nice room with a comfortable bed and brought him a tuna sandwich whenever he asked for one. Several times a day different people came into the room asking the same questions over and over again. But mostly he talked with Agent Ryan, whom he got along with well.

There wasn't much my parents could do to punish him.

They couldn't ground someone who doesn't care if he can't leave the house.

They couldn't take away the phone, computer, or TV from someone who doesn't use any of them.

They could have taken away his tap shoes, but they knew he would just tap in regular shoes or his bare feet — muted tapping.

“No more tunnel digging,” Dad said.

Coop agreed.

Later, up in his bedroom, I asked him about his hands.

“No big deal. I got some blisters when I put out your pants. They got infected when I dug us out.” He hesitated and tears came to his eyes. “The worst part of it was thinking that I killed you, Meatloaf.”

Coop would have gotten out of the tunnel a lot faster without having to drag me through the suffocating muck.

Coop hung on to me with blistered hands.

Coop filled my lungs with air from his lungs.

Coop could have died trying to save me.

More than the tunnel had collapsed that terrible night.

After that, things weren't the same between Coop and me.

We were brothers.

We were friends.

But he no longer confided in me. It was as if we were in separate passageways.

When Coop talked to me, there was an echo now.

I couldn't tell where he was.

When I complained about it he said, “I've got to travel my path, and you have to travel yours.”

THE DAY COOP LEFT

I searched his room to see what he had taken with him.

Tap shoes. (Which were the only Christmas gift he had ever accepted from anyone. I got them for him last Christmas because the pair he was using looked and smelled like road-killed opossums.)

Half a dozen flashlights.

Some clothes.

A two-man tent.

A sleeping bag.

A beat-up backpack.

He left behind his purple stationery and envelopes.

Coop's life did not revolve around things.

HI, COOP

Sorry it took me so long to send this recording, but I didn't want to sound like an idiot, so I had to practice for a while. I would have rather written you a letter, but you said you wanted to hear my voice. So here it is . . .

Mom and Dad have separated.

Mom has a boyfriend. Dad has a girlfriend.

If it works out, you will have three half sisters, a stepfather, a stepmother, and a half parrot.

Mom is with a widower named Wayne, a real estate lawyer in Boca Raton, who has three daughters under the age of five. She moved to Florida. Dad is with a girl not that much older than you. Just kidding. But she is a lot younger than Dad. Her name is Denise. She's an ornithologist. She and Dad go birding almost every weekend, leaving me home alone with the parrot. I guess this is good, because Dad's looking up now instead of down . . . at least on the weekends.

I was ballistic when you took off without telling me, and mad for months when you didn't contact me.

I'm over it now. I guess.

What are you doing? Where are you working? What's it like there? Where do you live? How long are you going to stay wherever you are? Are you tapping? Are you ever coming back here?



Holy cow, Pat. A half parrot? I always wanted a parrot. I guess half a parrot is better than none. But I'm sorry to hear Mom and Dad split up. They may not have been pleased with the two meatloafs they baked, but they seemed happy with each other . . . at least most of the time. I hope they get back together . . .

Me?

I've been exploring. I know that New York City is only a few hours by train from McLean, but I took the long way around, hitching to California, up the West Coast through Oregon and Washington, then back east across Canada, dropping down from Quebec.

When I finally got here I knew I was in the right place. What I'm looking for is here. I don't know how to explain it, but I can feel it . . . It's close.

I know you're wondering: What is Coop looking for? You're not alone. So am I. All I know is that something has been pulling me my whole life like some kind of cosmic magnet, and I think the magnet is buried someplace here. I need to find it and ask it what it wants.

I'm not working. I'm not looking for work. I live wherever I am at the end of the night. I'll stay here until I find whatever it is I'm looking for. In the meantime there's a lot to see. I have a lot to learn. And of course I'm still tapping. The shoes you gave me are magical.

I'm running a little low on batteries. I think there's still some

up in my room. Throw them in with the next recording. I'll cut this short because I need to find a stamp and an envelope and catch the postman. Wonderful to hear your voice, Meatloaf. I mean that. I miss you. Everything is good here . . .



Coop, I found the batteries in your room along with your purple stationery. I've included some of it with some stamps. Not much to talk about here. School. Homework. Neighborhood. On weekends it's just me and the parrot most of the time. His name is Vincent and he doesn't like anyone except Denise, who's had him since she was a little girl. He's chewed up some things around the house and screams a lot, but Dad doesn't seem to care. He's changed since he and Denise got together. Smiles more. He's exercising. He bought an expensive pair of binoculars. A couple of days ago I came home from school and he was wearing jeans, an untucked polo shirt, and Birkenstocks. He's growing his hair out. He doesn't shave on weekends. At night he and Denise spend a lot of time looking at topographical maps and bird guides. They listen to recorded bird calls and test each other. Denise wins every time.



Hey, Lil Bro . . . I'm at the library today getting out of the rain, doing some research. I met this old guy who knows

everything about New York City . . . especially underground. He turned me on to a bunch of books about it.

Here are some interesting New York City factoids . . .

For the first two hundred years pigs were used to clean the streets. Twenty thousand of them!

The city is built on rock, but there are hundreds of streams, springs, and sucking sand-whirls beneath New York. In fact, the New York Public Library, where I'm sitting right now, is on top of the Murray Hill Reservoir, where the city used to get its water.

There are one hundred and seventy varieties of precious and semiprecious stones in the rocks beneath the city. Amethysts, opals, beryl, tourmalines, garnets . . . Whoa! Hang on . . .

I just hopped a subway uptown . . .

I'm at the American Museum of Natural History now looking at one of the biggest garnet crystals ever found in the US. It came out of a ditch on West Thirty-Fifth Street. Before they put it on display here someone was using it as a doorstep.

In this one I thought I'd just take you through one of my nights here in the city. Kind of like carrying you in my pocket. It's going to sound a little weird because I'll be turning the recorder off and on . . .

"Yo, Curious Coop, my man. Where you been, CC? Got your shoes? Listen to this . . ."

Tap, tap, tap, tap . . . tap, tap . . .

"Not bad, Taps. You should have been on Broadway."

"I was on Broadway. Now let's see what you got."

Tap, tap, tap . . . tap, tap, tap, tap . . .

"Whew. You got the juice, CC."

"Who's that?"

"Some girl. Look's like a junkie, wearing shades at night like that."

"She's not a junkie. There's something about her."

"I got bad vibes. Leave her be."

"I'm going to talk to —"

"Too late. She's disappeared into the night."

"I think I've seen her before."

"Forget her . . . By the way, the mayor was asking after you last night. You got her ear. Likes you. I think she's gonna take you down."

"That's good news."

(After the tap dance I hear Coop walking for about ten minutes, without a word, as if he's forgotten the tape recorder is in his pocket, then . . .)

"Hi, Meg."

"Evening, Coop."

"You didn't happen to see a girl pass by recently? Street girl — small, wearing shades."

"Didn't see her, but I wasn't looking."

"No big deal. How's Tootsie?"

"See for yourself."

"Has she been eating?"

"Nope. She's not interested. Gettin' old like me I guess."

"Maybe she'll be interested in this. I'll just break off little bits."

"You're a good boy, Coop. Nobody cares about Tootsie and me but you. I found some books in the trash yesterday. Saved them for you."

"You should read them first."

"You know I don't read no more. My eyes."

"How about if I read them out loud to you. I used to read to my brother all the time."

"I ain't no baby that needs story time. Got my own stories runnin' in my head at high speed in high def. Just take the books, you rascal. I gotta be going. It's gonna rain tonight. You gotta place where it's dry?"

"Soon, I might have a place where it never rains . . ."

And that's how it went. Back and forth for several months. I'd send a recording. A few days later Coop would send one back. His were much longer than mine and a lot more interesting until . . .

NOVEMBER IS COLD HERE, PATRICK

but I'm sticking in the city. A lot of people head south for the winter if they can scrape together enough cash. And no, I'm not asking for money. I don't need it. I already have my entrance fee, and it's taken me months to earn it. Keep sending those recordings, and I'll record you back when I can. I have to go now. My guide awaits.

When I first listened to this I didn't think much about it. The only thing that struck me as a little odd was that he called me Patrick. I'm Meatloaf, Lil Bro, Pat, but never Patrick. That would be like me calling him Cooper, which he hated. This all started with my parents, who did not believe in the shortening of given names. My father's name was Bertrand O'Toole, never Bert. My mother's name was Ariel O'Toole, never Ari. To annoy them, Coop took the *er* out of Cooper. And when I was born he took the *rick* out of Patrick.

I replied with another one of my boring recordings.

Then another, and another, and another, then some letters . . .

I've been checking the PO box on the way to school and on the way home.

Empty.

No word from Coop.

Here's what Dad said . . .

"So you've been sending recordings back and forth and Cooper is in New York?"

"Yeah. But it's been a month since he sent one back. I think something's happened."

"Maybe he moved on. Maybe his recorder is broken. Maybe he didn't pay the PO box rental fee. Maybe he's just preoccupied . . . you know how he can get."

"Or maybe he's in the hospital."

"A hospital would contact us. He would have to fill out forms. Next of kin, et cetera, someone would call us. He didn't contact you for a year after he left here. What makes you think he wouldn't do that again? And he didn't contact me or your mother at all."

"I think something's happened."

"I think he's fine, but, if you want, I'll file a missing person's report. Now, I need to talk to you about Christmas break."

"What about it?"

"Denise and I are going to Belize to try and find one of the rarest birds in Central America, the keel-billed motmot. I emailed your mom and she said you can spend the holidays in Florida with her."

(Mom and Dad had stopped talking on the phone, because when they did they argued. You can't argue in an email . . . at least not loudly.)

"I don't want —"

“I know, but you can’t go with us. We’re going to be gone for sixteen days, and you have only two weeks off of school. And we are going to fly. No other way to get to Belize quickly. You can take the train to Florida. I’ve already bought you a ticket.”

“Does Mom really want me in Florida?”

“Absolutely! She misses you, and she wants you to spend some time with your . . . uh . . . potentially anyway . . . step-sisters. If your mom . . . Well, if she marries this guy, those three girls are going to be in your life for the rest of your life.”

“You’ll check on Coop?”

“First thing tomorrow morning. I’m sure he’s fine. Don’t worry about him.”

BUT I AM WORRIED ABOUT COOP

and the longer it goes without a word from him the more worried I become.

I've lost track of how many recordings I've sent. Two weeks ago I included a self-addressed stamped postcard with a note telling him to send it back to me so I would know if he was okay. All he had to do was drop it in the slot at the post office. It didn't come back. I sent a registered letter he had to sign for. He didn't sign for it. The letter came back. I called the post office in New York and asked a postal worker what they did with regular mail that wasn't picked up. He told me if the letters have return addresses they are sent back to the sender as undeliverable. (All of my unregistered letters and packages had return addresses. None of them have come back.) I asked him if he knew Coop. He said he couldn't tell me, and even if he could, it would be unlikely he would know him anyway. "Kid," he said, "I've been at this post office for over twenty years and I don't even know everyone who works here."

I called the FBI.

I asked for Agent Ryan — the same agent who had showed up at the house when Coop blew up the neighborhood. When she finally got on the phone I was surprised she remembered who I was.

“How’s Coop?” she asked. “I haven’t heard from him in a long time.”

I told her that he was missing and that Dad was going to contact the police in New York.

“Not much else he can do,” Agent Ryan said. “Coop’s eighteen now. He’s probably just out stretching his wings . . . seeing how they work, doing his own thing. Before I joined the FBI I was a New York cop. Finding someone there who doesn’t want to be found is nearly impossible.”

“I’m worried about him,” I said.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” Agent Ryan said. “I’ll send a memo to our New York office. Do you have a recent photo?”

“I can email you one taken before he left. I don’t know if he looks the same.”

“That’ll do. I’m sure Coop looks like he’s always looked . . . charming. The NYPD has a better chance of running him down than we do, but you never know. One of our people might get lucky and come across him.”

“I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Like I told you, I like your brother despite his little accident. There’s something different about him. You know?”

I knew.

Dad hasn’t gotten much further with the cops. He filed a missing person’s report, but the detective told him that Coop was a low priority.

“I was on the phone with the detective for over an hour.

And the only reason he spent that much time talking to me was because I dropped the Nobel laureate bomb.”

(Dad rarely drops the Nobel laureate bomb. He thinks it’s unseemly.)

“He wouldn’t tell me how many missing person’s reports were filed every day in New York, which led me to believe there were a lot of them. He told me the priorities were children and seniors. I emailed him a couple of photos of Cooper, and he said they would run them against the John Does they have in the morgue. He’ll also send Cooper’s name to all the hospitals and clinics. That’s all he could do. A needle in a haystack was how he put it. He said that most of the time the missing person isn’t really missing. They’re just hanging out with friends. Or lying low. Or they’re out of town. They resurface eventually. If Cooper is in trouble — or if he’s injured — there’s a chance they’ll find him. That’s all we can do.”

“We could hire a private detective agency.”

“I asked him about that too. He told me it was a huge rip-off. Private investigators make a fortune on long shots like this, milking the family for everything they have. I know you’re worried about Cooper. He’ll show up when he’s ready. I’ll call that detective when we get back from Belize. Who knows — Cooper might just show up here for Christmas.”

“We’ll be gone.”

“He has a key. Leave him a note. I’m sure he’ll stick around until you get back from Florida.”

I didn’t tell Dad, but . . .

I'M NOT GOING TO FLORIDA

It's Thursday afternoon. December 23.

I'm on a train headed north.

I talked to Mom about Coop.

Her reaction was almost identical to Dad's.

She sounded exhausted and not exactly overjoyed about me coming down for Christmas.

I guess the stay-at-home-mom-with-three-toddlers thing was not nearly as energizing as astrophysics and being an astronaut. She was interviewing for a position at Kennedy Space Center, confident she was going to get it, and said I would be hanging with my three potential half sisters and their full-time nanny during the day.

Right.

It's cold. Frost on the window.

Dad thinks spending two weeks in the rain forest looking for a keel-billed motmot is more important than spending a day in New York City looking for his son. I can't even pretend to know what Mom is thinking. All I know is that neither one of them are thinking about my brother.

Coop is a rare bird too.

I began planning my expedition weeks ago.

Late this morning I wrote an email to Mom from Dad.

Patrick has changed his mind about going to Florida over Christmas. He wants to go to Belize with me. I warned him about the long flight, but he swears it won't be a problem. I hope he's right. Anyway, we'll take him with us. We're heading out in a couple of minutes. Merry Christmas.

After I sent the email I disabled Dad's email account.

I also unplugged the home phone, took the SIM card from his cell, ran hot water over it, then slipped it back into the cell. Oops. No signal.

They dropped me at the train station on their way to the airport.

I exchanged my ticket to Orlando for a ticket to New York City. Got almost two hundred dollars back to add to my stash of cash.

Yesterday I told two friends who can keep their mouths shut what I'm doing just in case something happens and I don't make it back to school on January 3. I gave them Mom's number in Florida, because Dad will still be in Belize, and told them where I'm staying in New York, the Chelsea Star Hotel. It's not far from Coop's post office and it's down the street from Penn Station, which I'll be pulling into in about two hours.

I'll spend the time re-listening to Coop's recordings. Somewhere in them he's told me where he is.

I plug my earphones in.

Ten nights to find him.