

DOUBLE

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The boy's face was blunt and open as a wheel of cheese. Fair, some freckles, with a bowl of hair around his head the color of straw. Ten, maybe eleven. At first, no different from any of the other kids in the museum, coming in with their parents, with their frazzled, middle-aged teachers. Above anything else, they wanted to touch. They reached their pink, splayed fingers to the exhibits, the walls around them, the air in front of them.

If I describe a place, can you tell me everything you know about it?

The boy had asked Leslie this at a little table in the museum library where she worked as an assistant reference librarian. The building housing the museum and the library was an old ironworks in a downtown neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Brick painted deep red, windows trimmed in black. It was a large building, and stretched a city block. At night, the old-fashioned lampposts on the sidewalk threw the building back to some other time, as if you could walk backward into the last century. But Leslie knew this was false. Before the repainting and the lampposts, the building had contained only exhausted ironworkers and groaning machinery.

Leslie first noticed the boy when he had wandered away from the children's interactive exhibit, where they could learn about old-fashioned daguerreotypes. Dress yourself from the

costume closet and make your own.

The boy was skinny; either too young to have started filling out or doomed within five years to the kind of lankiness Leslie associated with the junkies that were always hanging around the bus station. Maybe that was unfair. He was dressed in jeans and a faded yellow t-shirt. This set off his fair hair strangely. Made him look more sallow than he probably was.

It's a big gray building on Bedford Avenue, he said.

The boy's name was Freddie. He said he wanted to learn about the building for a school project. The assignment included learning about the history of one of the city's buildings and writing a short report on it.

What's that? Freddie asked. He pointed to an old gray stone building in a group of images Leslie had displayed on the computer screen.

I don't know, Leslie said. She clicked the image of the building.

Reisberg House. Jacob and Eileen Reisberg founded the center in 1889 for the immigrant children of the neighborhood to gather and be taught about positive spiritual and physical health. The Reisbergs were committed to making the immigrant American experience a successful one for themselves and all their neighbors. Basic personal hygiene was encouraged along with rigorous spiritual cleansing via prayer and good values.

The center had a somewhat brief but significant period in which it was turned into a school from 1906 until 1918, when it reverted back to a neighborhood recreational center due to the increase in the number of schools opening throughout the city.

The facilities included a boxing ring, swimming pool, gymnasium, temple, classrooms and athletic fields.

Looks like it was a school at one time, Leslie said. A recreational youth center. She read on. Says it's been abandoned now for some time.

Freddie waited quietly in a chair beside hers.

Leslie accessed the catalogue. There are a few folders, probably photographs mostly, she said. Does that sound like something you want?

Freddie nodded. His yellow bangs flapped up and down.

Leslie drew a call slip from her stack by the computer and began filling it out.

She was gone a few minutes. When she came back from the back room filing cabinet where many of the photographic archives were stored, Freddie was seated at one of the long, high-polished dark wood tables that flanked the room in two rows. It was adorned with a desk lamp that had a green glass shade.

Leslie held a thick brown file folder. She placed it on the table and sat opposite Freddie. He reached for the folder.

Not yet. We have to follow the rules, Leslie said. She brought a bundle of white cotton gloves from the pocket of her dress pants. Use these to handle pictures, she said. She picked up one of the gloves. She nodded at Freddie, and he smiled and stuck out his hands. Oddly, a watch encircled each wrist. A glowing-green digital on the left. An analog on the right, with a fabric band and black roman numerals on its face. Freddie noticed her staring.

I like time, he said.

Leslie smiled. Me too, she said. Why not?

She slipped each glove onto Freddie's hands. The motion was awkward at first, then smooth as each finger landed. It was an intimate gesture, like dressing a baby after a bath. She wondered what it might be like to be Freddie's mother. Perhaps an older sister. She was an only child. She couldn't remember ever having put gloves on any hands but her own.

Freddie didn't move immediately toward the folder, as

if he were waiting for Leslie to leave. He sat with his white-gloved hands clasped in front of him like a tiny English butler. Leslie stood.

I'll leave you to your research, she said. Freddie nodded slowly.

Leslie spent much of the next hour busy with call slips for amateur historians and college students. She had barely stopped moving until it was time for her lunch. But when she scanned the room, Freddie's table was empty. About ten photographs were spread across the table. There was no sign of the gloves she had given him. Would he have just left and taken the gloves? You know the callous way of children. Leslie walked to the table.

All of the photos were black and white, at least fifty years old. Some of them much older. Wide shots of groups of children on the steps in front of the building, taken on the school's picture day. Other photos were more candid: two boys playing basketball, one leaping, the other pushing his hand in front of the ball to block his adversary's shot. The face of the boy shooting was strained in concerted effort, eyebrows drawn.

Leslie put down the photos. She wondered if Freddie might be in the bathroom, went through the glass doors and down to the main floor to check. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw to her left the historic trolley car exhibit near the museum café. An actual trolley car from the 1940s donated to the museum and turned into a live exhibit. Fully restored. The bright glossy paint gave it the look of a large red and white bullet. Each side of the car had a column of single seats running along the windows, a narrow aisle in the middle.

Freddie was sitting at the back of the car. Leslie sat across the aisle from him. His hands were folded in his lap; he stared out the window as if the trolley were still in use and moving through a busy city street.

Before she could speak, he said, I have weird dreams. How are they weird?

I don't know. Just weird, he said, then asked, Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be the last person in the world?

I don't know. Sometimes I feel like that, Leslie said.

You do? Freddie asked. He looked from the window to her face, studied her.

Leslie nodded. She wondered if maybe Freddie was having some trouble at school. Was he shy, did he have friends, etc.? There was the possibility of bad parenting. In his voice was a sadness familiar to her—a woman alone in a city that was not her home. She had gone to college within a few miles of the rural Pennsylvania house in which she'd grown up, had moved to Pittsburgh for her job. When she applied, she'd looked forward to the possibility of moving. You feel a certain sense of curiosity and excitement. Now she was here. That was that. Are you done with the photographs? Leslie pointed upward to the second floor.

I think. Can I make copies of some of them?

Sure, she said.

Upstairs, Leslie handed the photos Freddie had chosen to a work-study student for photocopying. She went into the back room to fetch a fresh group of books for another patron: an older professorial type. When she returned, she looked for Freddie, but he had gone. The little white gloves lay on her desk.

Leslie didn't think of Freddie again until days later.

When she arrived at work, he was waiting for her in the library at one of the tables nearest her desk. This was unexpected. Wasn't the project turned in by now?

She dropped her purse on her desk.

I need to show you something, Freddie said. He had his black backpack with him. He stood and lifted the bag as he spoke.

What is it? Leslie whispered. Quite a few people in the

library that day—whispering, a standard procedure.

Freddie asked, Can we go outside somewhere?

The day was white. Windy and dry. They walked to a bench at a bus stop at the top of the block.

Sometimes in my dreams the world is ending and I can't wake up, Freddie said.

That's a nightmare, Leslie said. Regular dreams don't treat you that way.

Freddie unzipped his backpack and pulled out a photocopy he'd taken home from the library days earlier.

Here, he said. He handed Leslie one of the larger class photos. Black and white. Taken outside on the front steps of the Reisberg building. There were three rows of children, all about Freddie's age, staggered with a row on each step. Flanking the children on both sides were a few teachers. They were dressed in dark, drab-looking uniforms. The children were all in white, girls and boys mixed together. Some of the boys had messy hair, some slick-looking parts. The girls wore pigtails or ribbons. None smiled. You wonder if the idea of smiling for the camera had been very slow to emerge, historically speaking. Eyes gazed every which way—some were closed. Frozen in the act of blinking.

What is it? Leslie asked.

Freddie reached his finger toward the photo.

There, he said.

She followed his finger to a child in the front row at the right side of the picture. It was a young boy, lightish hair, staring straight into the camera with tiny dark eyes. He had that same blunt-looking face. Same bowl of hair.

He looks a little like you, Leslie said.

How funny it was. She laughed at the coincidence. At the corner of the photo someone had written with a photo pencil, *Reisberg House School, Class of 1908. September 16, 1907.* In the here and now, it was also September. That same stretch of days, marching toward a bone-cold Pennsylvania winter.

Freddie said, He doesn't look a *little* like me. He looks *exactly* like me.

So what? Leslie asked. She looked again at the photo. But Freddie stuck out his hand and grabbed it back. What's the matter with you? Leslie said. He had surprised her. The force of his hand.

I don't like it, he said. It's another me.

That's crazy, Leslie said. A jagged word she had not meant.

Freddie stood. The photocopies slipped from his lap and landed on the gray pavement.

I'm not crazy, he said. I'm not.

Leslie bent to gather the copies. Well I didn't mean it that way, she said.

Freddie shouldered on his backpack. He made no movement to help Leslie retrieve the copies. Instead, he checked the watch on his left hand, then brought his right forward, checking that one against the other. An effort at parity. As Leslie stood, she saw the bus approaching the stop where they'd been sitting. Freddie moved to the curb.

Don't you want these? Leslie held out the stack of photocopies. The bus pulled creaking to the stop.

No, he said.

Can you take the bus alone? Leslie asked. She knew so little about him. Freddie didn't answer. When the bus door opened with a short hydraulic hiss, he climbed the steps and fished for money in his pocket. Leslie watched him, about to be swallowed by the mouth of the hulking bus. Where had this boy come from? He stood there, just a child in the black space of a bus doorway.

Before the door closed and the bus departed, Freddie yelled something to her over his shoulder. You'll see, he said. And then something Leslie didn't quite catch. *It's you, too?* She wasn't sure exactly. Something like that.

At Leslie's studio apartment in Squirrel Hill, the television ran on mute while she undressed for a bath. On the TV screen was a stiff news anchor with a powdery face. He brought his hand to a device at his ear. The screen switched to a shot of a desert village, soldiers running in no discernable formation. Some went one way, others another. Small arms fire pegged the walls of the buildings they had just used as cover. Tiny puffs of smoke and chips of plaster exploded from the wall. When the program switched back to the anchor, he looked as he had earlier, the same hand to his ear. But something else in his eyes this time: a sheen of fear. Leslie turned it off.

Naked, Leslie went to her bag and pulled out Freddie's stack of photos to bring with her to the bathroom. She stepped into the tub and the water folded over her lap.

She held the photos above the water and paused on the one Freddie had shown her at the bus stop. The group photo of all the children. They were stony-faced, strange-looking children. *Reisberg House School, Class of 1908. September 16, 1907.* Freddie's double stood in a white, long-sleeved shirt and short black pants. He wore black shoes. His face did look just like Freddie's, with a shade of forlorn confusion that came from a lifting of the chin and downturn of the brow. She noticed one hand at his side, the other grasped by the hand of a woman beside him. She was tall, part of a group of women by the right of the photo. These particular children's teachers. They wore billowy, white blouses tucked into high, black skirts. The waistbands started under their breasts. None of them beside the one had any contact with individual children. There was an older woman with faded eyes, and a matronly teacher plump in the middle as a spinning top. They wore smiles that were not smiles, exactly. Lines drawn across their faces.

Leslie looked back at the woman who held the hand of Freddie's double. Her face was turned toward the boy. Only her profile was visible in the white light of the photographer's flash. *But that profile.* Cool air traced the parts of Leslie's skin

that lay above the water: her knees, the sensitive stretch of skin over her collarbone. *You're in it, too*, Freddie had said, standing before her in the mouth of the bus before the doors could swallow him. In the picture, the second Leslie stared down at the boy in the droopy, black socks with love on her face. As a mother would.

The phone rang in the other room and Leslie dropped the photos in the tub. She cursed, fished them out. It was too late. They were already heavy with water, drooping like sodden fabric from her hands.

Leslie didn't recognize the number. The surprise of the photo was still with her. When she answered, she heard silence first. Then, the unmistakable up-and-down tones of children at play in the background.

Is this Leslie? I'm Freddie's mother, Mrs. Gantz, the woman said.

How did you get my number? Leslie asked.

A girl at the museum, she said. There was a high-pitched yelp in the background. Freddie had a family Leslie hadn't thought of until now. He had a home. Siblings. This soft-spoken mother. All this lay in the faraway of the phone line between them. I wanted to see if you'd like to have a play date, she said. With Freddie.

A play date? Leslie repeated. It was a phrase from childhood made up by parents. A strange phrase that was a mashed together meaning of two different words, each not exactly right on its own.

I know it sounds real weird, but Freddie doesn't have a lot of friends. She lowered her voice as if he were nearby.

Leslie swallowed. I don't know Freddie all that well, she said. I've just been helping him with his project.

Project?

The historic building project for school.

Oh. I don't know about that.

Leslie thought, What had he told his mother about the

museum? Probably he was just quiet. But maybe there was no project. This was a piece of information; the significance of which she was uncertain. Leslie thought of the small, gray boy in the row of children on the steps of the Reisberg House. She didn't want this cloudy feeling of responsibility, befriending this strange child. Almost an act of charity. Yet, hidden under that veil of obligation was a fear that had begun in her breast the moment she'd seen herself in the photo.

All right, Leslie said finally. She heard something muffled on the other end of the line. Words, indistinguishable.

How's the 16th? Mrs. Gantz asked. Freddie says it has to be then. It's a Thursday.

Leslie agreed, and Freddie's mother exhaled in the way Leslie recognized from people who had recently surrendered to something long battled, something once thought possible but since abandoned. An untrainable dog. Your strange child. She heard the bobbling echo of the phone changing hands.

Leslie? Freddie asked.

Yeah, she said. A whisper, almost.

Did you see?

Leslie knew immediately what he meant. Still, she paused before answering. Yes, I did. I'm in it.

Good, Freddie said. He sounded as if he were smiling, maybe a trick of the line. I'm glad you saw it, too, he said.

Before Leslie could answer, the phone was passed back once again. Mrs. Gantz began talking about the logistics of the date and Leslie searched for a pen to write down directions. The photos remained on the floor for some time. They had darkened, their surfaces buckling from the water.

That night, Leslie dreamed:

*It's odd the children have no faces they are lined up
on the stoop just like in the picture their faces blank as the
smooth shell of an egg and you wonder how a child can
scream with no mouth yet the sound will stay with you well*

into the following day—

At noon on the 16th, Leslie took the bus to Freddie's house in Bloomfield. He lived on a side street off Liberty Avenue, which was lined with small bars, Italian delis, a Thai place, pizza shops. Many of the storefronts occupied ground floor spaces of old brick buildings topped with cramped, drafty apartments. There was a coffee house attached to a video store on one corner. An old man with a ribbed wool hat sat smoking a cigarette outside the door. At his feet, an aging German Shepherd.

Freddie's street was no more than an alley, the kind of place that told of a time in the past when streets were narrower, cars some distant dream. Homes were crammed close—disjointed row houses with no lawns to speak of. Doorsteps opened directly into the black macadam street. Freddie's house had a newer façade: mint-colored aluminum siding almost worse than the neglected brick. A Steelers decal was plastered to the window at the front, and the door was cheap wood with a design of three diamond-shaped cutout windows rimmed with brass. Leslie knocked.

After a few seconds, Mrs. Gantz answered. She was very short. Wide hips. Yellow-blond hair that curled out from her face in frizzy puffs. She wore an oversized peach sweatshirt that washed out her pale face.

They greeted each other, went inside and talked a little. This and that. Leslie stood on rust-colored shag carpet with this frumpy woman in a leaning, cruddy house in Bloomfield. The home of Freddie, who was just a lonely little boy in the gray city where she lived.

Mrs. Gantz led her through a tight hallway until they reached a door that stood a few inches ajar. This is Freddie's room, she said. She knocked, called out to her son, and retreated the way she had come.

Freddie turned at the sound of the opening door. He was sitting at a white desk under a window that faced a brick

building not two feet from the house. Makes you wonder, what's the point?

Hi, Leslie said.

Freddie was silent at first. Leslie looked around the room. A twin bed with wool coverlet. A small television and video game console. But the most noticeable things were the clocks, so many of them, arranged about the room. There were wall clocks trailing wires to the floor. On the bedside table, an old-fashioned alarm clock with two bells at the top and a round-tipped ringer. Digital clock radios on Freddie's bookcase and desk. There had to be at least thirty clocks in all: plastic, chrome, faux wood. Each had been stopped at 1:52. A suspension of the third hand. In Freddie's room, it was always 1:52.

AM or PM? Leslie asked.

PM, I think. We'll find out together. Freddie stood. I've got to get my jacket.

We're not staying here?

Freddie started down the hall ahead of her. Leslie was alone in his room, among the silence of all those frozen clocks. *I like time.*

We're going to the house, he said over his shoulder. For a silly moment, Leslie thought: What house?

(They're searching for what, exactly? Leslie hasn't asked the questions she should. Who ever does? She is someone who eats her dinners from a plate balanced on her lap in front of the television, chews absently with her mouth slightly open. Freddie, the best friend she has in Pittsburgh. In six months she's had not so much as a phone call, a lunch, with anyone outside of her workplace.)

On the bus, Freddie told Leslie about a dream he had started having over the summer. It would start a white flash. Afterward, everything was stopped. People in mid-stride. Rain suspended in the air. Cars leaving a trail of particulate matter the color of their paint, as if the landscape of this world was a picture some giant had smeared a clumsy hand through. In this

dream place—the stop-time place, as Freddie called it—it was 1:52. The clocks on the microwave in his kitchen had told him this, as had the digital marquee above the bank up the street. In the first dream, he'd been in his room. Just hanging around at 1:52. As the dream returned, he'd ventured farther and farther from his house, walked into the streets of Bloomfield. Into the homes of other people. He looked at their clocks, their lives, their bodies stuck in the in-between of doing mundane tasks. Man vacuuming. Child on a bike standing upright on its two wheels, nothing to support it but the air surrounding. It was probably afternoon. That gray-white Pittsburgh sky. But then each dream would end with a descending blackness that swallowed him until he woke, awash in sweat and breathing with the desperate gulps of someone drowning.

It was 1:15 on a Thursday afternoon. The bus to the Hill District was mostly empty, save for an old man and a woman in a saggy green hat with a tired face who looked as if she might be riding the bus for a reprieve from life in a cold city where she had no bed, no people.

As Freddie spoke, Leslie listened with the kind of detachment one feels when in public with a person who might be insane. But, your threshold for insanity may be wanting. Could it possibly be proportional to your loneliness? More likely he had some form of autism. She had recently read a piece in a magazine about the autism spectrum. But did that explain the photograph? Had he lied about the school project? Ask about the Reisberg House. Ask the right question. Or is there the danger of losing yourself in the world of his dreams?

They arrived at their stop. The Reisberg House was on Bedford Avenue in a part of the Hill District that hadn't been razed years ago. You make way for new construction because that's the way the world works. The building was on a block lined with other buildings in various states of disrepair. Windows were missing, shut up with plywood.

It had rained the night before. When they got off the bus,

the wet grit from the road scraped under their feet as they walked.

Freddie knew the way, knew when they were close. The whole time, he'd been checking his watches.

Late for something? Leslie asked.

No, I just want to make sure we get there in time, he said.

In time for what? The building is condemned.

Freddie didn't answer.

Bedford Avenue was deserted but for the odd car passing slowly by. The sidewalk crumbled into the street, and the buildings they passed looked shabby. That lonely feeling of a vacant lot. Something slinking off to die. As Leslie walked she felt a sudden bubble in her throat—the surprising possibility of tears. She did not want to cry on this dirty crumbling sidewalk in a bad neighborhood in a place she did not love, did not care at all about. She was a person whose progress through life was slow and quiet. She'd stayed close to home too long. You have the option to trade a certain sense of freedom you might like to have, but isn't necessary. Are you someone for whom some things, some freedoms, seemed forbidden? (e.g., a close group of friends? Boyfriends?) These are held back from you—privileges afforded only to people who strike into their lives like sprinters toward a fluttering strand of tape. Leslie swallowed the bubble in her throat. Could it all have been a certain kind of dormancy, a hibernation from which you can, at any time, awake into a future you have never imagined?

The Reisberg House was constructed with large blocks of gray stone. A shelf of cement steps at the front ran the width of the building. Leslie recognized these steps as the place where the class of 1908 had been photographed, stiff in their fussy, old-fashioned clothes. You brace yourself. Flinching is involuntary.

The house had three floors. Many of the dark windows were webbed with cracks. One window was marred by a hole that formed an almost perfect circle, as if a wayward baseball

had pitched through cleanly. Old paint peeled from the front double doors in strips like bark from a tree. Leslie unconsciously did as she always did when she saw houses, buildings: rearranged the features of the façade to create the awkward formula of a face. Windows for eyes. A door mouth. At the right side of the building's front, a stone at the bottom corner displayed a small and instantly recognizable sign—a black circle containing three inverted yellow triangles. A relic from a time before the building was condemned. Eroded by neglect.

As they approached, all the dread—the strange weight in her steps—seemed to lift from Leslie. It was not a place for people. They should not have been there. And yet you desire to be inside. As if this building itself contained all those things that had been held back from you for so long. Allow yourself to be carried away with the adventure of it all.

Freddie's hand paused on the doorknob. Before he went forward, Leslie glanced once behind her. In that gray, cracked neighborhood there was no one. Not a soul on the street. Not a bird. Not a dog, sniffing at the sewer or scratching its ears. An empty city, Leslie thought.

Inside, the Reisberg House looked like a house. The front double doors opened into a large foyer and a wide set of stairs leading to an upper floor. The wooden banister was dusted with a spray of plaster. It had sifted down from the aged ceiling. A matter of time passing.

Freddie checked his watch again. He pulled a flashlight from his jacket.

Light from the uncovered windows filtered in to lie across the scratched wooden floorboards. In the air, specks of dust like snow shimmering. The room was lit only by the white day outside.

It's like a ghost house, Freddie said.

They talked a little. Touched the dusty surfaces to make skinny, finger-size marks. Leslie made a comment about the grandness of the foyer. Freddie climbed a few stairs, then

returned.

She followed him down a long hallway toward the back of the house. The walls were painted a fading ivory color, and swaths of mildew speckled the areas by the floor. They paused in front of a door that looked as if it might lead to a gymnasium. It was locked. The next door a few yards further opened into an enormous, high-ceilinged room. Skylights on the roof washed bright the large rectangular swimming pool in front of them. Empty of water, its tile walls were cracked, the pieces broken and spread across the downward-sloping floor.

Wow, Leslie whispered. It was the size. Airy, bright, like a greenhouse with nothing growing. Empty of life. They stood at the long end of the room. Leslie pictured the ruined pool as it may once have been: children afloat in green-tinged water. Echoes of splashing, laughter. The pools of your childhood, smelling of chlorine. Creep toward the deep end. Jump in, eyes squeezed shut against the cold. Leslie turned to Freddie.

Your mom said you don't have any friends.

Freddie stared out at the rectangular hole in front of them. We won't need them, he said. His eyes looked strange. You're my friend, aren't you? he asked.

Of course, Leslie answered. And she was, wasn't she? Do you ever know what may happen from one moment to the next? Leslie sniffed. The room smelled overpoweringly of mildew. Let's go, she said.

They returned to the main hall and Freddie wandered in a direction they hadn't yet explored. Nearby, a dead phone hung on the wall in the kitchen doorway. The coiled cord trailed down and stopped a few feet before touching the dusty floor. Leslie noticed another door off of the kitchen hallway with a knob and frame that had a modern look of reinforced steel. Leslie reached for the doorknob, and a jolt of static electricity threaded her palm. She pulled back, stung.

I got a shock, Leslie said.

Freddie was silent. He had that forlorn look of the Freddie

in the photo. It was disconcerting. Leslie heard the click of his flashlight, and a spot of weak, white light played across the door before Freddie moved to open it. He stepped ahead of her. You want to know what happens. Leslie followed him down the dark stairway.

They were in a long room with tan brick walls and thick steel pipes webbing the ceiling. Load-bearing posts stood throughout. It had the feel of a child's playroom. The space made Leslie revert to the stock images in her mind that she associated with the 1960s. Beehive hairdos. The chalky colors and grainy pictures of sitcoms from that era. Long before the Reisberg House had been condemned, this was a place singled out during that time of political paranoia, reinforced with steel, boxed supplies. A certain foolish hope that stone and cement can keep safe blood, bone, an entire way of life.

The pale haze of the flashlight shimmered in front of them as if they were underwater. Plaster dust covered the floor. There were scattered cardboard boxes with strange markings stenciled across the front. In one corner, what looked to be a rumpled sleeping bag. It smelled of urine. All the while, Leslie had been silent; she had felt as if there were something down here in this place that she was meant to find. But it was only a decrepit cave, dark and sad in its neglect. Freddie called to her from another corner far from the door where they'd come in. He was standing by a stack of boxes. The top box was folded open. He reached inside.

Look, he said. He lifted a metal canister about the size of a two-liter bottle of soda. It was marked *Drinking Water* in white lettering. There's got to be twenty boxes of these cans, he said.

That's probably been here for forty years, Leslie said. Her voice had gone quiet. This place, its strange animal smell, the darkness of it. Freddie checked his watches again, pointed the flashlight to each wrist to see.

Freddie, why are we here? Leslie asked. But the photograph had brought them here. This place underground. They

were still no more than strangers, really. Freddie looked at her. In the dark, his hair was washed out, gray like in the photograph. *His dreams torment him*, Leslie thought, and a new heaviness settled on her. In Freddie's face she saw the scene: the shiny varnished banister in that broad hallway of the house, and herself, walking in her black-laced shoes, long heavy skirt, a bun on her head sitting lopsided with wisps of hair trailing behind her ears. The photographer had been waiting. You can't help admonishing them for their tardiness, though children and punctuality hardly mix. *Don't run*, she said, and Leslie watched a group of little girls slow, then push through the heavy front doors. *Line up, stay together*. But then, a moment of panic; where was he—the little boy whom they all called her favorite because he was small and she, childless, friendless, recognized something in his face that seemed placed there long ago just for her. There, as she scanned the steps and the children twisted into their spaces—there he was. He was quiet as ever, his eyes a bottomless black, reaching a hand out to her. She couldn't imagine a time when she would not see him everyday, help him into his coat at the bell, tie his laces as he stood obediently still. You want this always. On the sidewalk, the photographer waved his hand for them to quiet. *Be still for the picture*, he said. Leslie and Freddie in the front, not hearing. Looking only at each other and sensing something creeping forward on the wind. Just before the flash, they turn their faces to the front. But instead of the photographer, his camera affixed to a stand and draped with black cloth, Leslie sees the dark of the basement, feels a shock to the ground on which she stands. Freddie's face changes. His eyes are big with surprise.

I didn't think it would actually happen, he says. He is shaking, and Leslie sees a thread of urine darkening the leg of his pants. In that moment, Leslie knows more surely than anything she has ever known that something outside, something above you in the world you left only minutes ago, is falling and it will

change everything. But before Leslie can ask Freddie what this is—why the ground has just been struck in such a way that you can feel an elemental sucking in your breastbone—she sees his flashlight move across the floor and up the stairs to the reinforced basement door, which he shuts, draping them in darkness. There is the sickening feeling that this—this—could possibly be the thing you have been waiting for all of your quiet life.

Leslie is surprised by her instinct to run. She moves for the door. No, this isn't what I wanted, she thinks. Things might have changed. Isn't this the wrong kind of ending? For the first time, the empty city that was her home these long months drops away as if it were a trapdoor, holding only temporarily above something unseen below. There is nowhere to stand. Nothing left to steady you. Freddie blocks the door.

You can't go out there, he says. He clicks the flashlight off, gropes for your hand. He is telling you in a trembling voice that we have to conserve the battery. We're going to need it.