

WHAT WE'VE SOWN

Volume One: The Sickness

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MeekDuke Books

What We've Sown — Volume One: The Sickness

Timothy LaDuke

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Stories for minds that see more.

THE MEEKDUKE SEEMORE FORMAT

This book was designed for minds that see more.

FOR DYSLEXIC READERS

Large and medium type alternate, so your eyes always have a place to land. Wide line and letter spacing. Words never split. Short lines.

FOR ADHD READERS

One scene per page — turn the page whenever you need a pause. Short chapters. Dialogue with room to breathe.

FOR AUTISTIC READERS

The same layout rhythm on every page. No surprises. Page numbers always where you expect them.

THROUGHOUT

Cream pages, soft ink — no glare, no harsh black-on-white. No ALL CAPS, no italics. Sans-serif, left-aligned.

Because different is not broken.

For my mama san.

For the sacrifices you made.

That we all learn to make.

Thank you for never giving up on me.

I know I took you on some journeys.

But I wouldn't be who I am if you weren't who you are.

I love you.

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MeekDuke Books exists for readers whose minds work differently — dyslexic, ADHD, autistic, and every mind in between. Every book we publish is formatted to be read in comfort, and no reader is ever left out of the story.

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1

The power went out at six in the morning and came back at six-fifteen.





2

No point resetting it. It would go out again by noon. It always did.



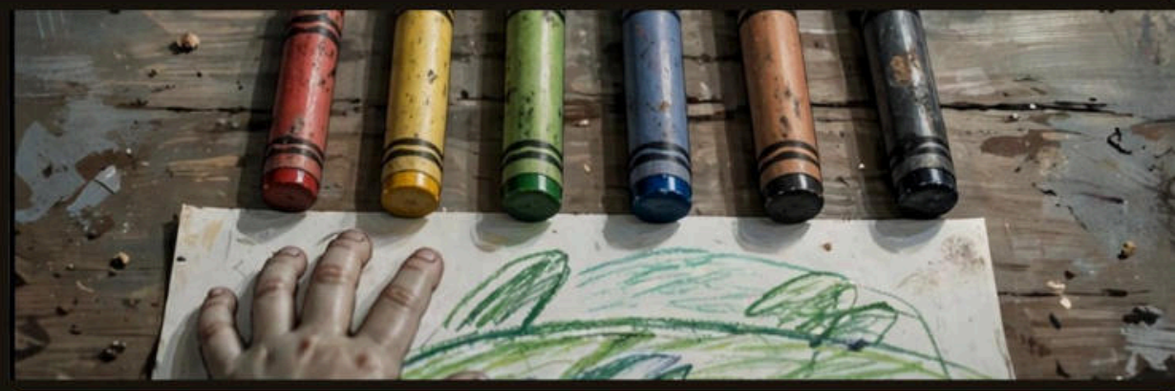
3

The gas still worked. For now. That was the phrase everybody in Bellamy used now, for everything.



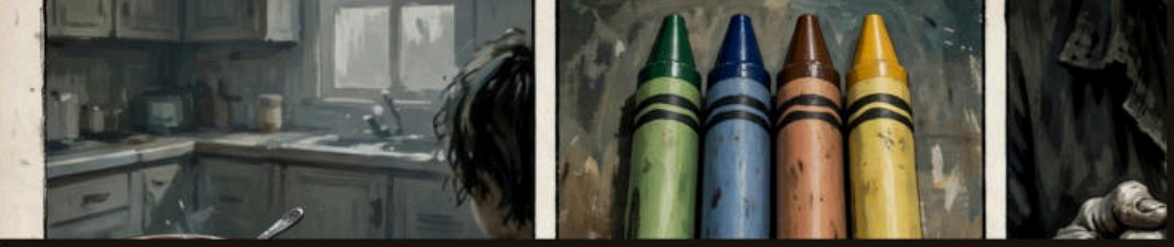
4

His hands shook a little, the way they'd shaken since he was twenty. Coffee, wrenches, mornings, everything.



5

Outside, Bellamy was doing its best impression of a town.



1

cough

Ellie coughed at the table. A small thing, dry. She didn't look up from her cereal.



2

Kids didn't line things up like that. Kids made messes. The row was too neat. It was the kind of neat that made the back of his neck itch.



3

She looked like any kid on any morning, and the ordinariness of it sat in his chest like a held breath.



4

Ray: You okay, baby?

Ellie (not looking up): Yeah.

cough



5

He filed it away with all the other small things he'd been filing away for weeks — in the drawer in his head marked for now.

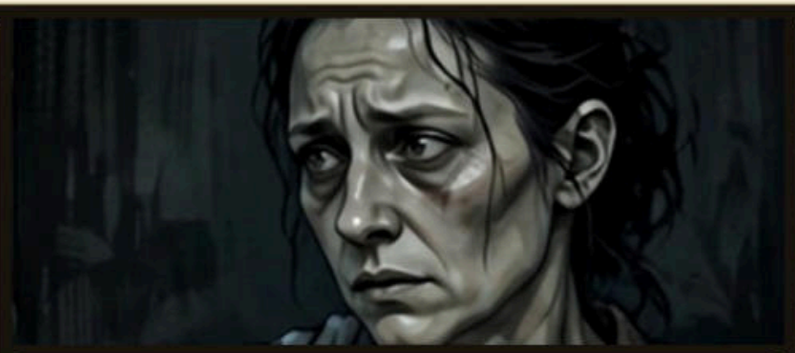
1

Her hand rested on Ellie's forehead a moment longer than the kiss required. Just a moment.



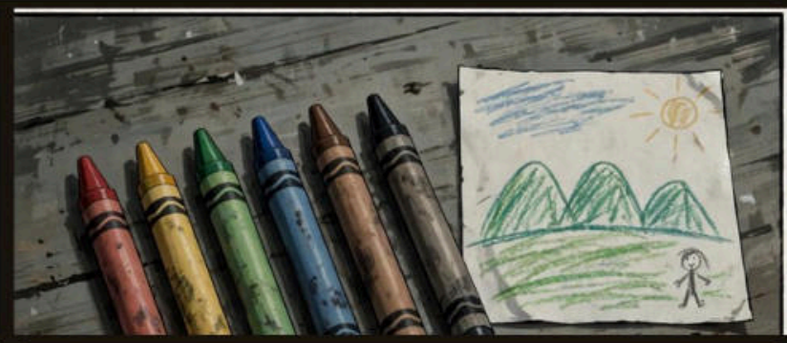
2

Ray saw it, and Nora saw him see it, and neither of them said anything.



3

She was building the morning out of small precise motions because the big imprecise ones would kill her.



4

They didn't listen for news anymore. They listened to make sure the man was still there.

5

Radio (thin, frayed): ...repeat, the interstate closures now extend through— ksssh —urges residents to remain in place—





1

He found himself wondering about the man. Whether he sat at a desk in Atlanta with a stack of paper. Whether anybody had told him he was the last thing standing between people like Ray and the silence.



2

Radio: ...Philadelphia General has ceased—



3

Ray turned it off.

4

cough cough

Ellie didn't look up.



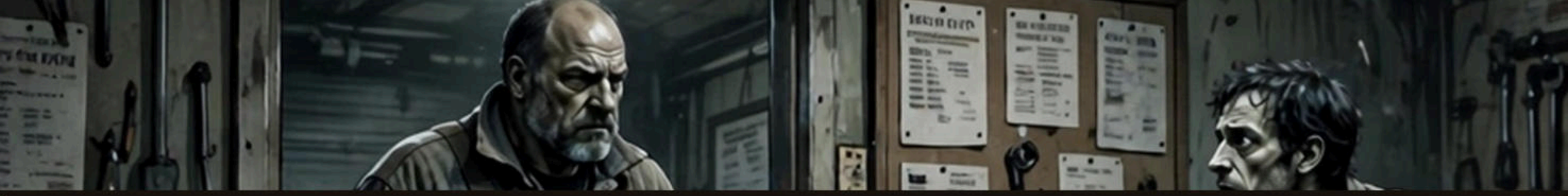
5

Boy: Mom's making him rest. His knee.

Ray: Tell him I said hey.

Boy: You open tomorrow?

Ray: I'm here every day. Somebody's got to be.



1

A Tuesday in August, ten in the morning, and Bellamy's Main Street had one teenager and one dog on it.



2

He stood there and remembered it the way you remember a dream — vivid, and already coming apart at the edges.

3

Radio: ...Philadel hia General has ceased operations...





4

He turned it off. The quiet came back, the big shop quiet, wind under the roof.



5

She'd been drawing the same thing for days. A field. Green crayon, blue sky. But she'd drawn it seventeen times.



1

Every time, in the corner, almost too small to see, there was a figure. Standing in the field. She never talked about the figure.

2

Seventeen drawings, and the little standing shape was in the same corner every time. Same size. Same distance from the edge. It wasn't the loose wandering mark of a kid doodling. It was placed. Like she'd stamped it.



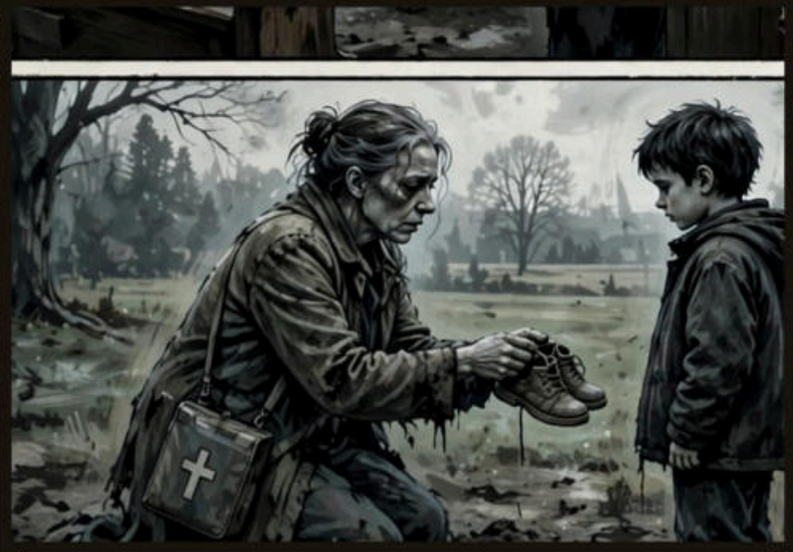


3

Ray (memory): What's that little guy doing in your field, baby?

Ellie (memory, not looking up): Standing.

Something in the flatness of it had closed the subject like a door.



4

COUGH

Ray: Ellie?

Ellie (thin): I'm okay. My throat hurts.



5

Warm. Not hot. Warm. The kind of warm you could talk yourself out of.

1

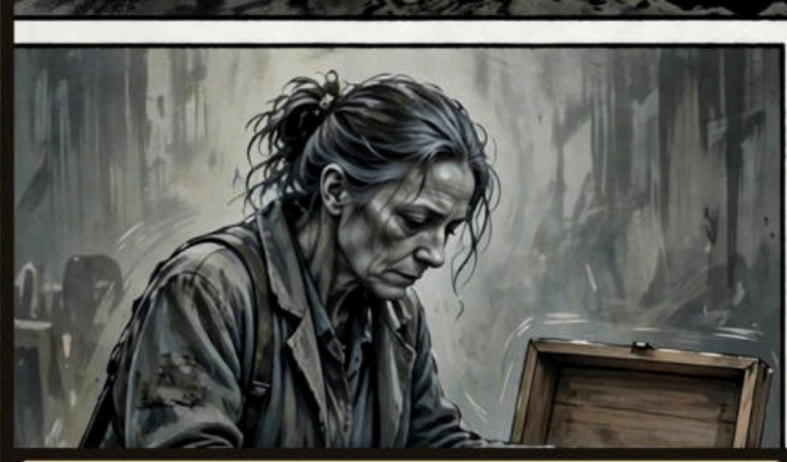
He told himself it was a cold. Kids got colds. The world was ending, but kids still got colds.





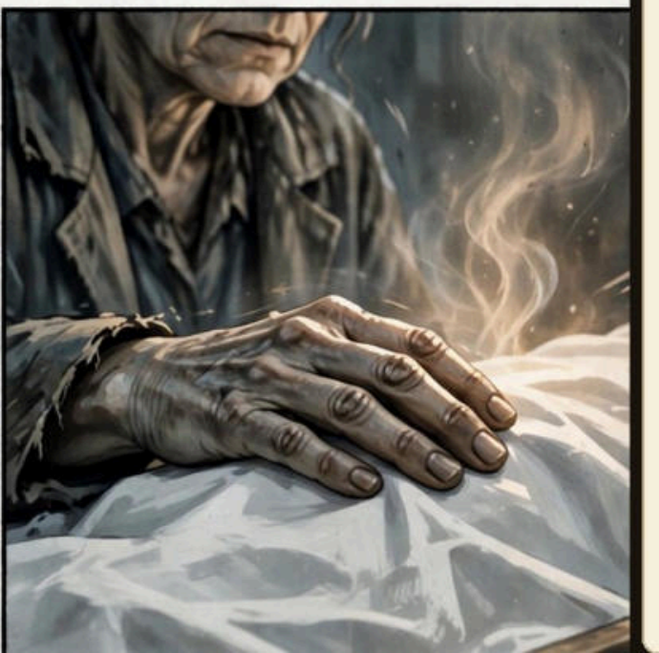
2

Around three, the power flickered on for eleven minutes. Then the building tried to remember what electricity was, and then gave up.



3

His father had died in this shop. In the office, at the desk, eleven years ago, a Tuesday afternoon like this one, his head down on the ledger like he'd just decided to rest.



4

Ray had never finished that day's book, and the unfinished page had bothered him for years the way an unsent letter bothers you.

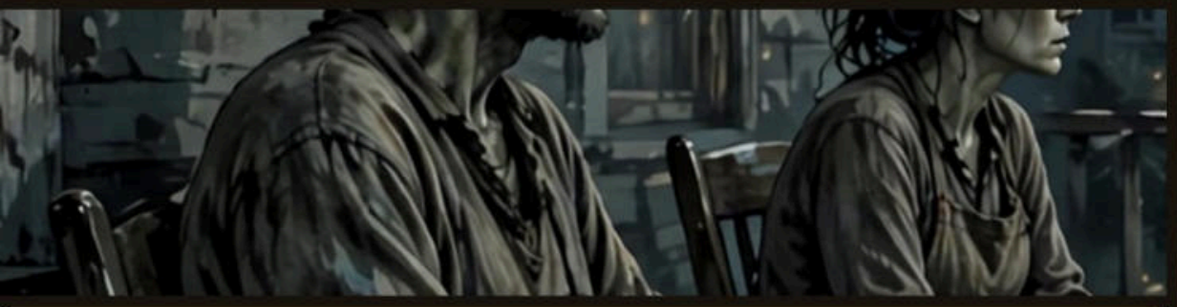


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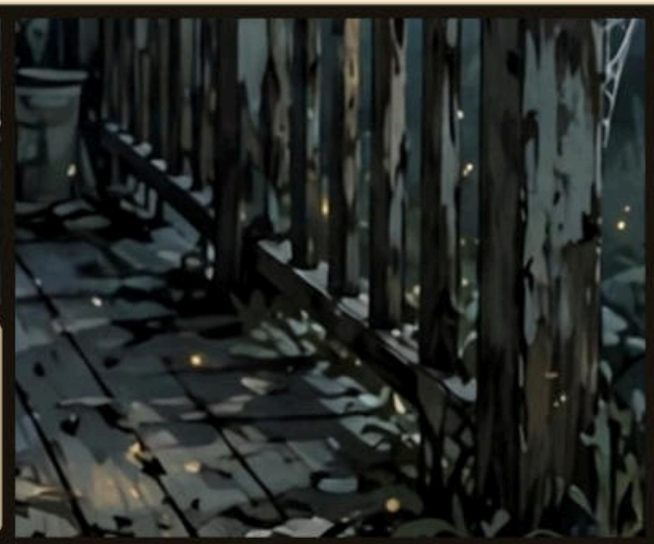
Now the ledger sat open every day with nothing in it, and Ray understood that his father had gotten off easy.



1
Nora took her temperature at dinner. 100.4. She wrote it on the back of a grocery receipt and underlined it once, like that would hold it down.

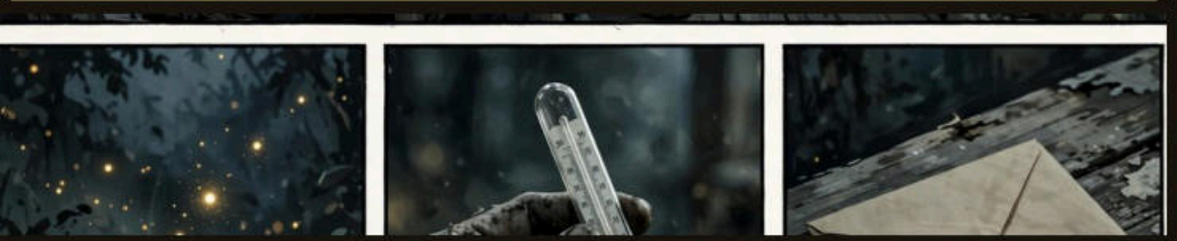


2
She folded the receipt in half and set it by the salt shaker, exactly square with the table edge.



3
Nora: It's just a fever.

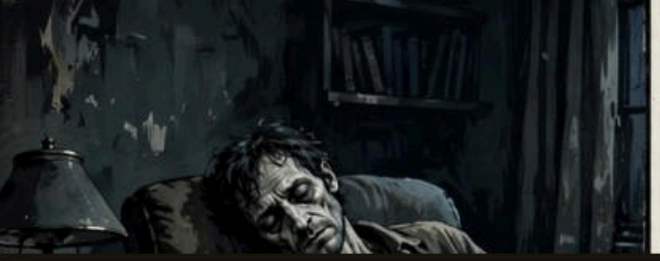
She said it too fast, and she didn't look at Ray when she said it.

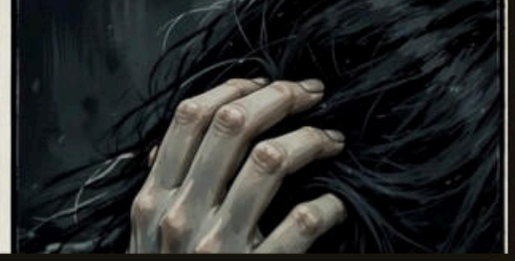


4
They'd watched it take the Delacroix boy in April. Four days from first cough to the grave. The father hadn't cried. He'd just stood there like it was a math problem he couldn't solve.



5
Old Mrs. Gable in May — fine at breakfast, gone by supper. He'd seen her broom leaning against the porch rail the next morning. Somebody had taken it inside. That was Bellamy then. Somebody always took the broom inside.





1

After dinner Ellie fell asleep on the couch with her head in Nora's lap. Her breathing was shallow and fast.



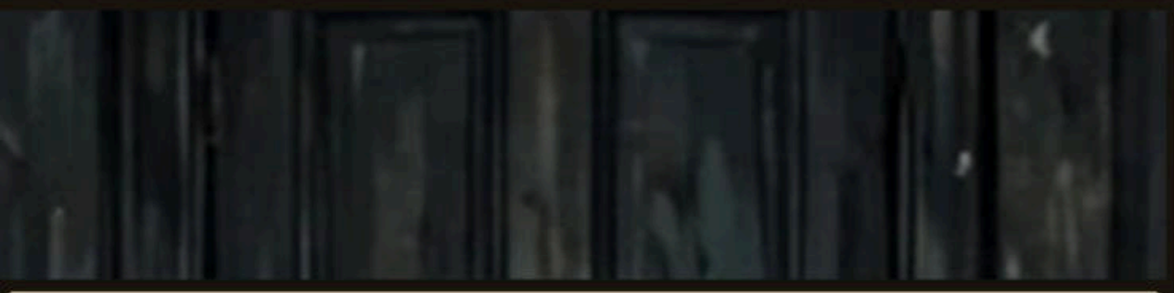
2

In. Two. Three. Out. Two. Three. In. He lost count and started over. Like a man timing a fuse.



3

Ray wanted to reach across the space and touch her shoulder, and he didn't, because he didn't know what his hand would do when it got there. Shake, probably.



4

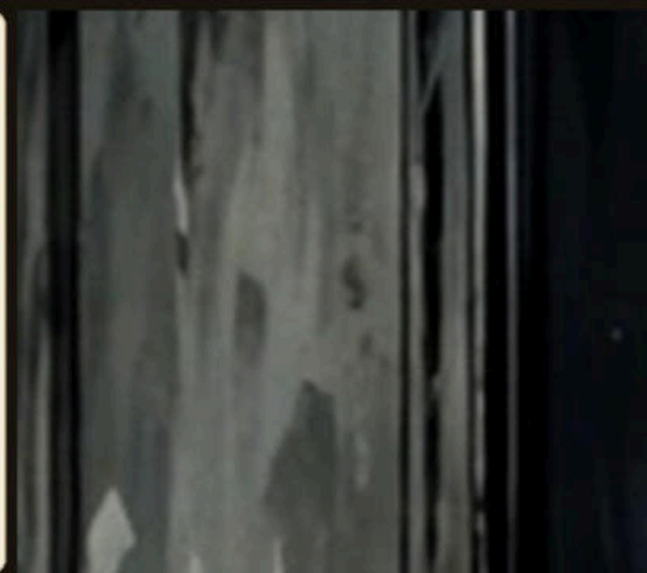
He told himself he'd come up in a minute. He sat in the dark living room and tried to remember what it had felt like, before, to not be afraid all the time. He couldn't.

5

Ellie (small, from upstairs):

Daddy?

He went up fast.





1

Ray: Hey, baby. Let's get you back to bed.

Ellie: I had a dream.



2

Ellie: There was a field. A big field. And everybody was there. All the kids.

Ray: That sounds nice.



3

Ellie: The Humming Man was singing. I couldn't see him. But I knew the song, Daddy. I don't know how I knew it.

Something cold moved down Ray's spine.

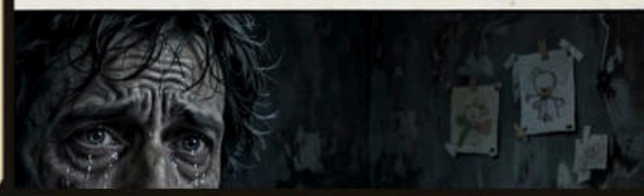
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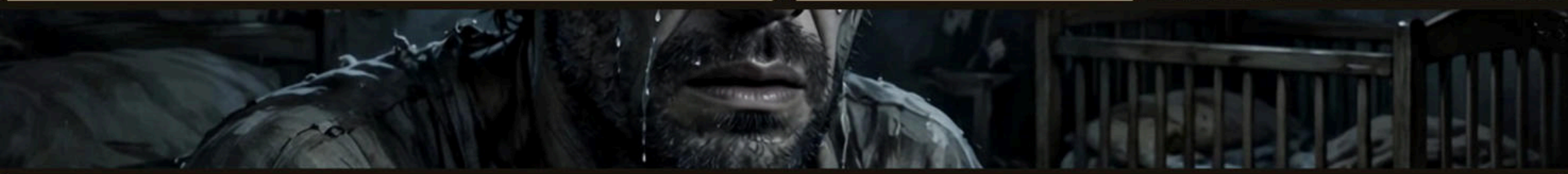
Ray: What song, baby?

Ellie (half-asleep):

I don't know. I just knew it.



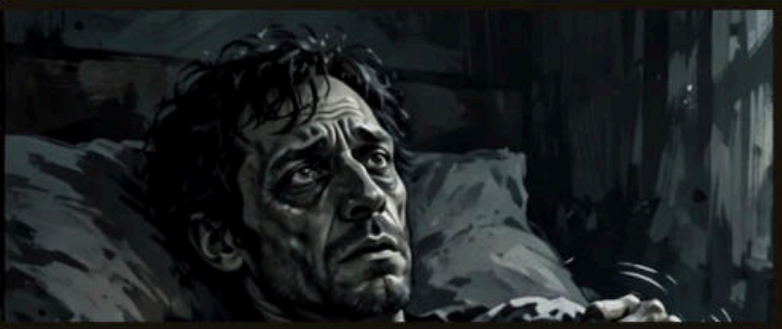




5

They didn't speak, because there was nothing to say that wouldn't sound like giving up.

1
Downstairs, the power went out. It didn't come back.



2
In the dark, Ray listened to his daughter breathe. And through the wall, very faint, he thought he could hear humming.

3
He told himself it was the wind. He told himself a lot of things that night.





4
Outside, Bellamy slept, or tried to. Twelve miles east, Dunmore was awake too, counting its own fevers.



5
And beyond that, in the cities, the numbers kept climbing under a sky that didn't care.



1

The power was still out in the morning. The house had a particular smell when the power was out — the refrigerator's cold leaking away one degree at a time.

2

Nora: Up from last night.

Ray: It's a fever. Fevers go up.

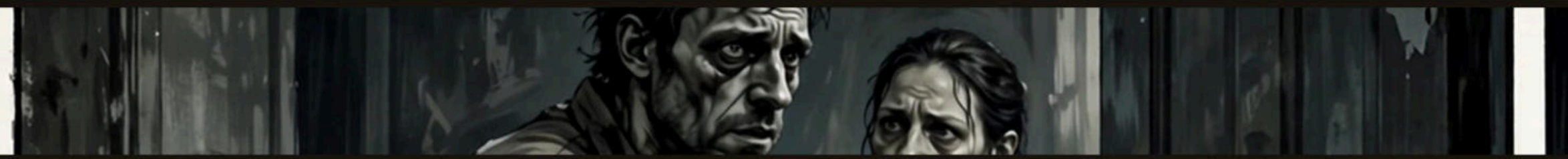
Nora: Fevers go up and down, Ray. This one's just going up.





3

In. Two. Three. Out.



4

Two knocks, heavy, the kind that doesn't bother pretending it might be good news.



5

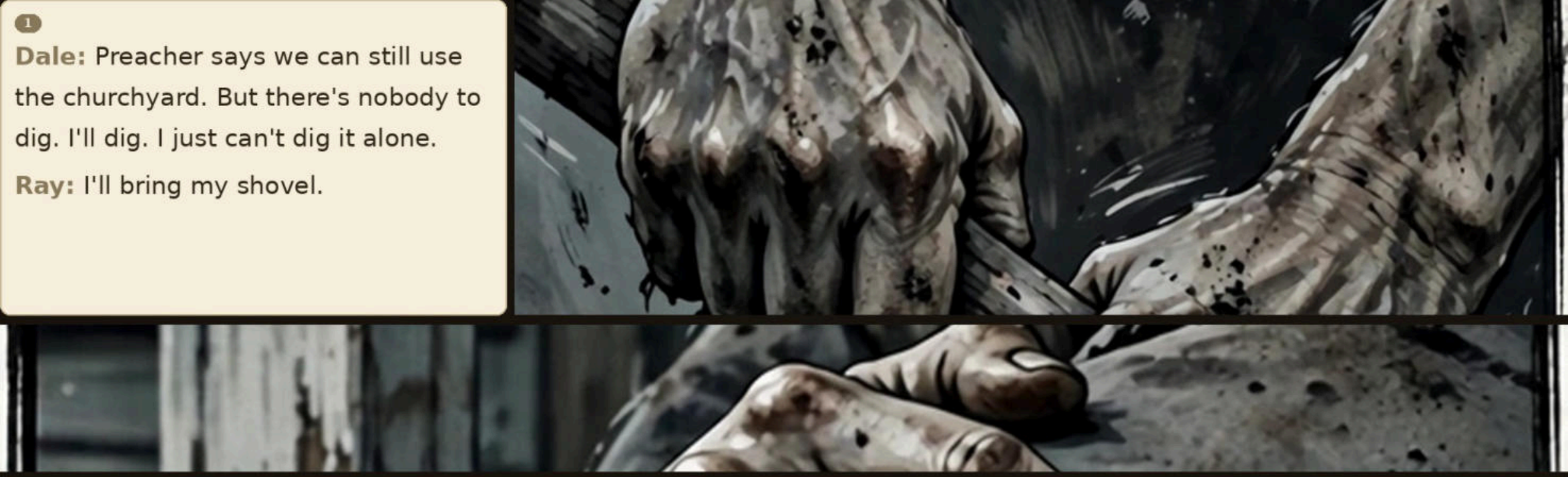
Dale: It's my mother. She passed in the night.

Ray had known Edna Whitaker for thirty years. She'd made the worst potato salad in Bellamy County and been proud of it.

1

Dale: Preacher says we can still use the churchyard. But there's nobody to dig. I'll dig. I just can't dig it alone.

Ray: I'll bring my shovel.



2

Nora: Eat something before you go.



3

He didn't wake Ellie to say goodbye, because she was sleeping, and sleeping was the only good thing happening in the house.



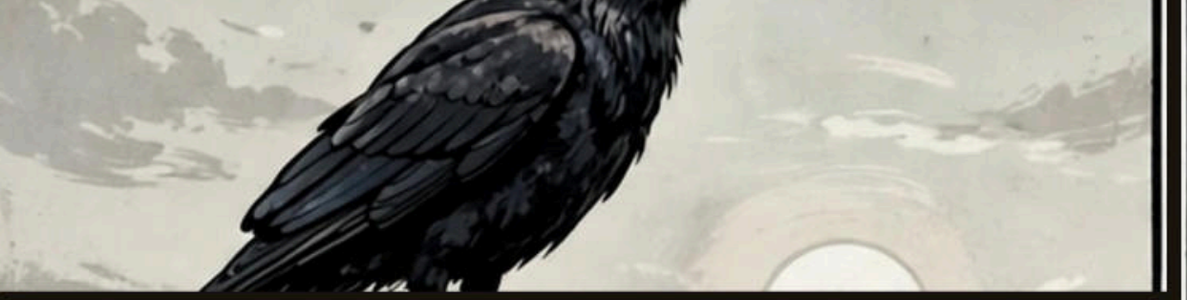
4

The churchyard sat on the hill behind Bellamy Community Church, where Pastor Alden had preached for twenty-two years to people who mostly came for the air conditioning.



5

The ground was hard. They broke it the slow way, taking turns, not talking much. Dig. Lift. Throw. The oldest work there was.



1

Ray thought about Edna's potato salad while he dug. The yellow Tupperware bowl. Everybody knew it was terrible, and everybody ate it anyway, because not eating it would have been like saying the town didn't need her.



2

They were three feet down when the truck came.



3

Marta: The Gable woman's sister. Louise. Found her this morning. Same as the others.

Dale (leaning on shovel):

Who—

Same as the others. That was the new math of Bellamy.



4

She wrote something down, then looked at the page and wrote something else underneath it, smaller. Like the first number wasn't the real one.



5

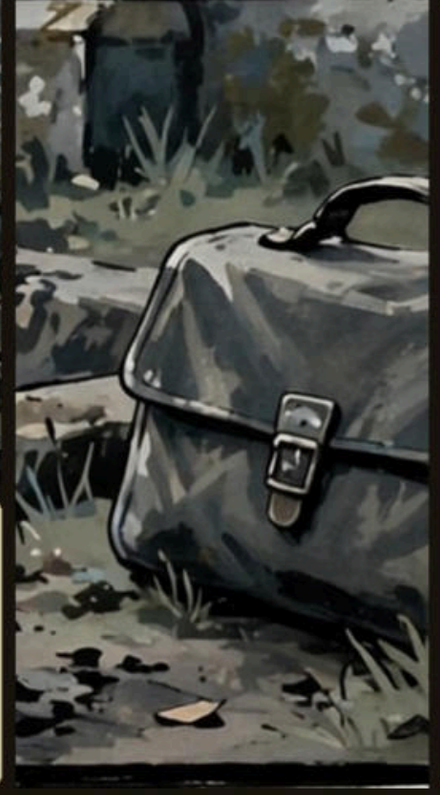
Somebody — Marta, probably — had fixed her hair. It wasn't vanity. It was a small precise motion, built against the big imprecise one.



1

Marta: Let me check her.

Marta went to the body with her nurse's bag.



2

Ray heard her stop. Just — stop, mid-motion, her hand on Louise's wrist.



3

Marta: She's warm.

Dale: What?

Marta: She's warm. Four hours dead and she's warm.



4

Dale: It's the fever. They run hot at the end. Everybody knows that.

Too quickly.

5

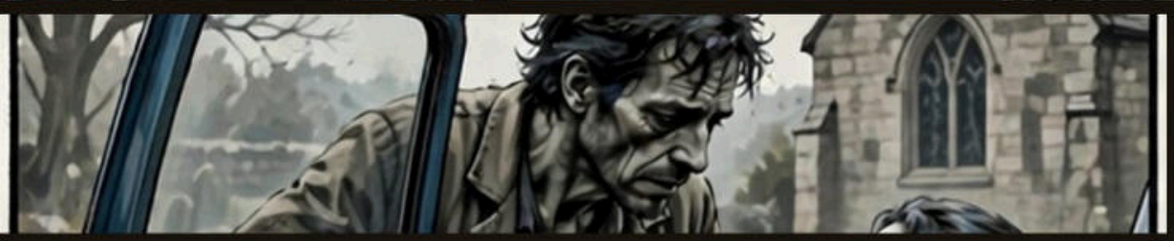
She left it there a long moment. Then she stood, folded the sheet back over the face — gently, the way you'd tuck in a child — and walked to her truck and sat in the driver's seat with the door open and didn't move.





1

She sat there a long time. Then she opened the notebook again and wrote something down, staring at the page, and set it on the seat beside her like she didn't want it in her hands anymore.





2

Ray: You're keeping two sets of numbers.

It came out flat, not an accusation. He hadn't meant to say it at all.

3

Marta: One set's for the town. The other set's for me.

Ray: Which one did Louise go in?

A long moment. The heat ticking off the truck's hood.

4

Marta: Both. She's in both.

He didn't ask what the difference was. He had a feeling that if he asked, she'd tell him, and a stronger feeling that he didn't want to be told.





5

A nurse wrote a number once. She didn't argue with it on the same page.



1

Warmth. Faint, but there. Like standing near a stove that had been turned off an hour ago.



2

Dale: She would've hated this. Not the dying. The fuss. She told me last month — "Dale, when I go, don't you make a production."

Five feet of packed earth, his mother under a sheet at the bottom of it.

3

Dale: She made me promise. I promised her. I don't know if this counts as a production.

Ray: It's a hole, Dale. It's just a hole.





4

They lowered Dale's mother, who'd made the worst potato salad in Bellamy County and been proud of it, into the ground on a Wednesday morning.



5

The whole thing took eleven minutes, because there was another one coming — everybody knew — and you couldn't spend all day on one when the math was what it was.



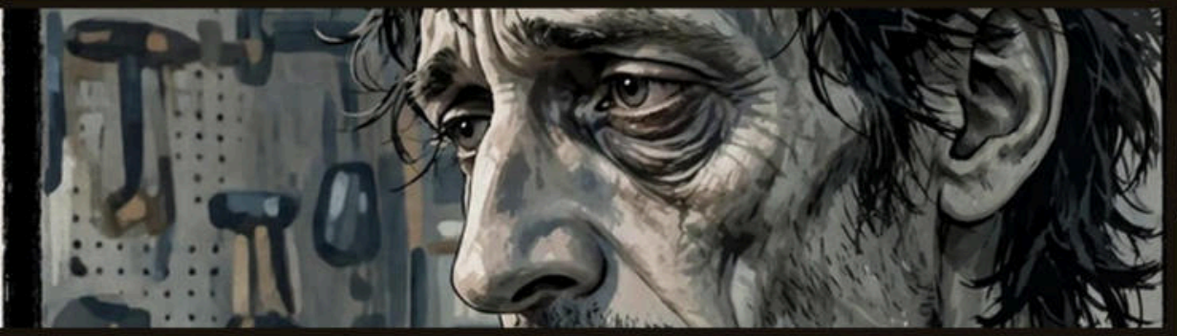
1

Twenty-two years of preaching to people who came for the air conditioning, and now he was burying them one at a time in the heat, alone on the hill.

2

He'd believed then, in the loose way of a man who'd never been tested. He'd believed the way you believe in a roof — because it had always been there.





3

Ray had stopped praying entirely, back in June. It had just — stopped being something he did, the way the mail had stopped coming on Thursdays.



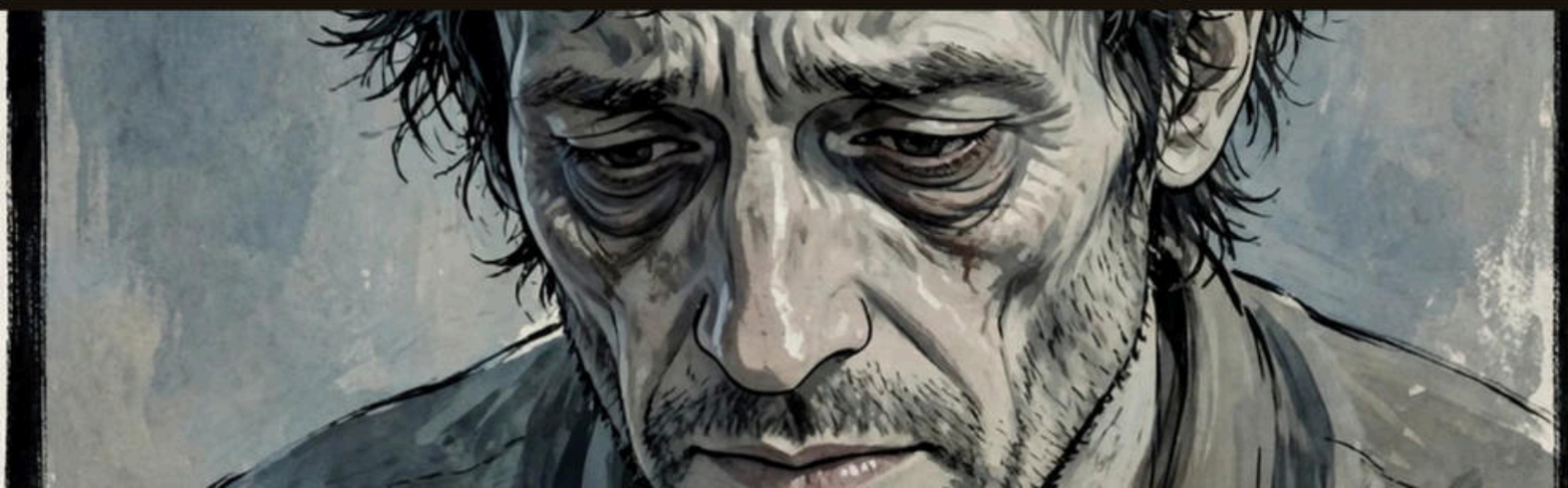
4

Alden: Danny Pruitt. Seven years old. Went in his sleep.

Ray (hands stopping on the wrench):

When?

Alden: Last night. Same as the old ones — cough, fever, gone. That's three kids this week, Ray.



5

Alden: You got anybody sick at your place?

Ray: Ellie's got a fever.

Alden put his hand on Ray's shoulder, and his hand was shaking. "We're praying for her. All of us."

1

Four courses. For three people. He did the division and then stopped doing it, because there was no answer that didn't feel like choosing.





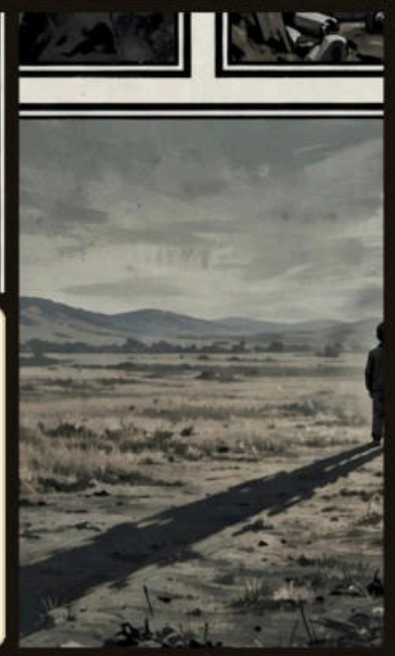
2

Cole Pruitt worked the line at the feed mill before it closed. His wife had left two years back. It had been Cole and the two boys ever since.



3

He didn't try to talk to him, because there was nothing in the world to say to a man digging his seven-year-old's grave.



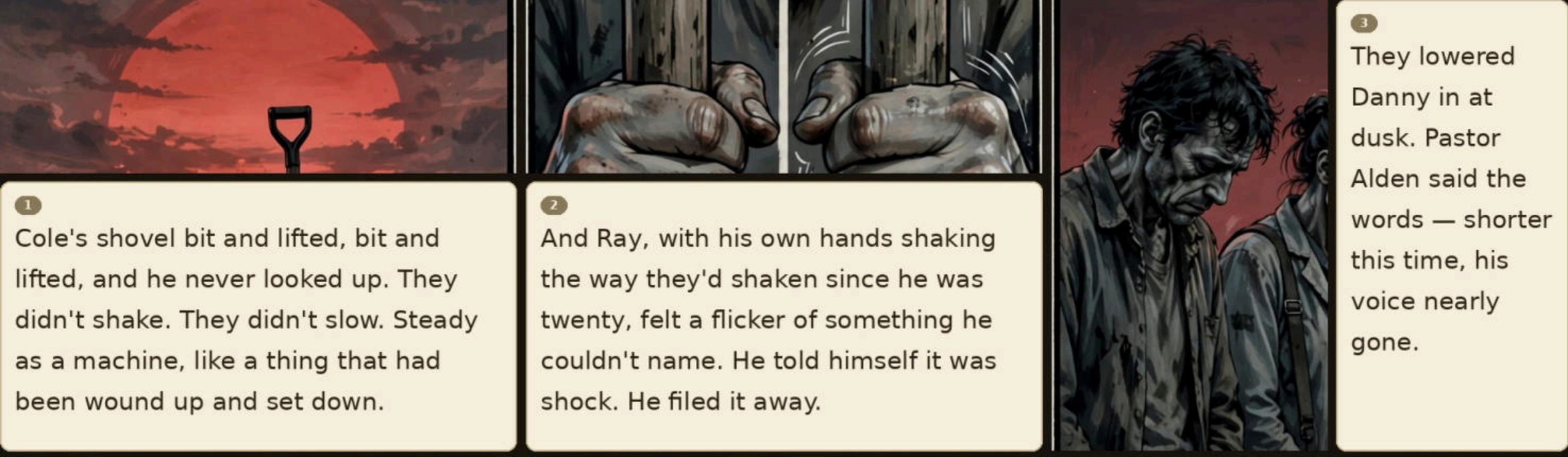
4

Tommy Pruitt stood at the edge of the churchyard the whole time. Ten years old, bare feet, watching his little brother's grave get dug.



5

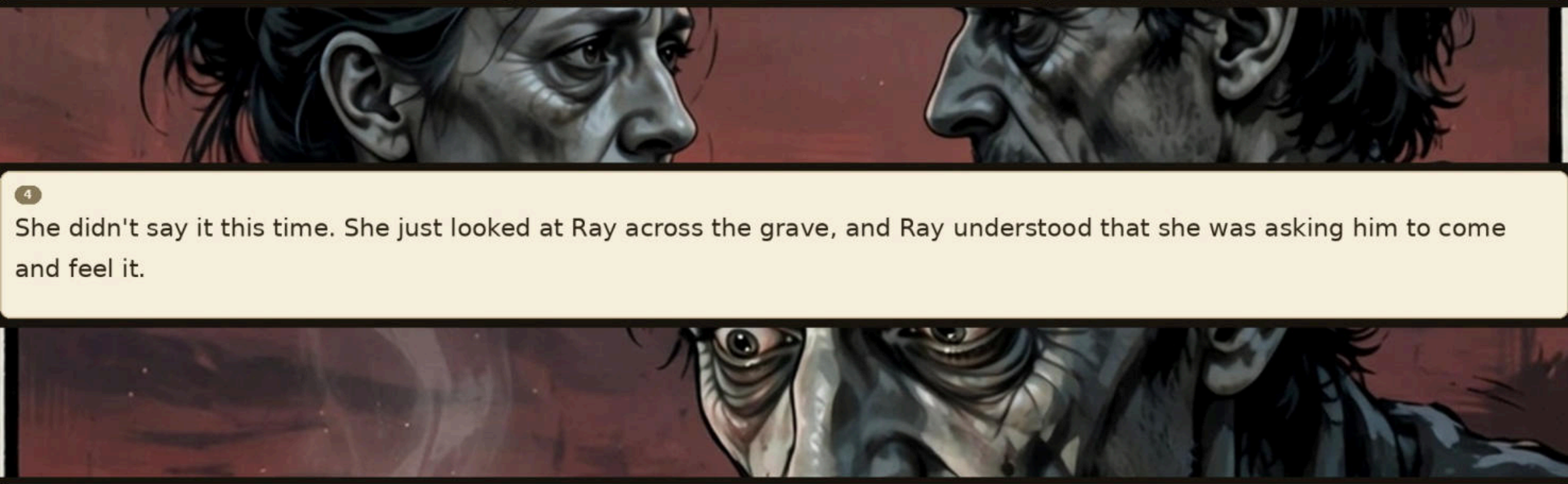
Ray would think about that later — how Tommy just stood there. At the time, he thought the boy was in shock.



1
Cole's shovel bit and lifted, bit and lifted, and he never looked up. They didn't shake. They didn't slow. Steady as a machine, like a thing that had been wound up and set down.

2
And Ray, with his own hands shaking the way they'd shaken since he was twenty, felt a flicker of something he couldn't name. He told himself it was shock. He filed it away.

3
They lowered Danny in at dusk. Pastor Alden said the words — shorter this time, his voice nearly gone.



4
She didn't say it this time. She just looked at Ray across the grave, and Ray understood that she was asking him to come and feel it.

5
The boy was warm. Four hours dead, in the evening cool, and warm as bathwater.

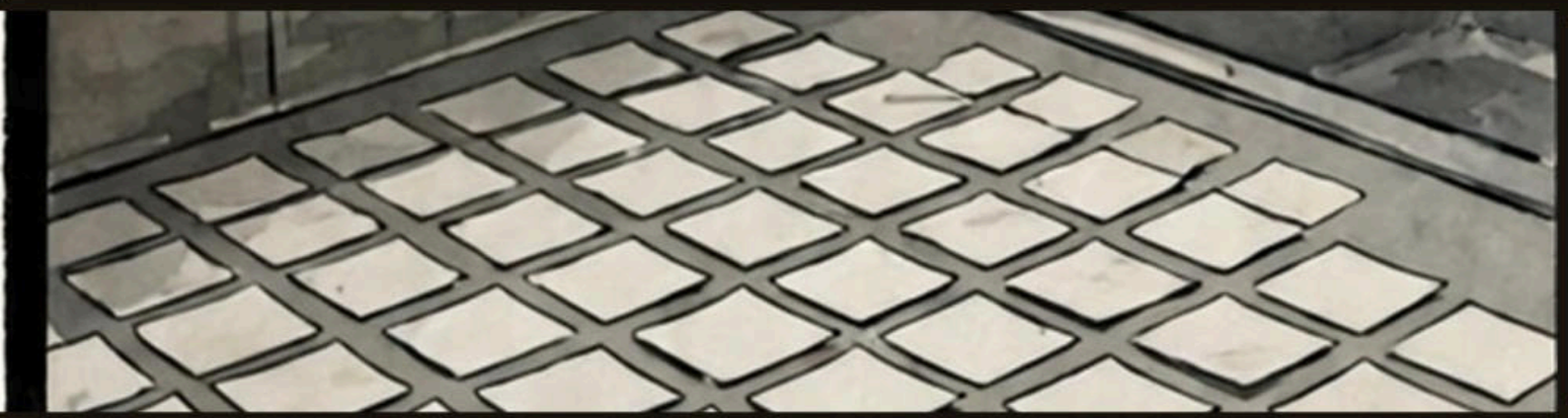




1

Cole: It's the fever. They run hot. The nurse said.

Marta folded the sheet over Danny's face with hands that shook — the first time Ray had ever seen Marta Reyes's hands shake — and said, "Yes. The fever."



2

Nobody said anything else. They filled the hole. Ray counted the fresh mounds as he walked down the hill — and stopped counting at eleven because counting felt like helping.



3

He drove home with the dust on his hands and Ellie's drawing in his head — the field, seventeen times, the figure in the corner standing where the wheat should have been empty.



4

Up from this morning.



5

He looked at his hands — shaking, always shaking — and he thought about Cole Pruitt's hands on the shovel, steady as a machine. He thought about the warmth, faint, like a stove turned off an hour ago.



1

Through the wall he could hear Ellie breathing in her sleep — too fast, too shallow — and underneath it, so faint he could almost pretend it wasn't there: humming.



2

101.1. 101.8. 102.4. A staircase going the wrong way.



3

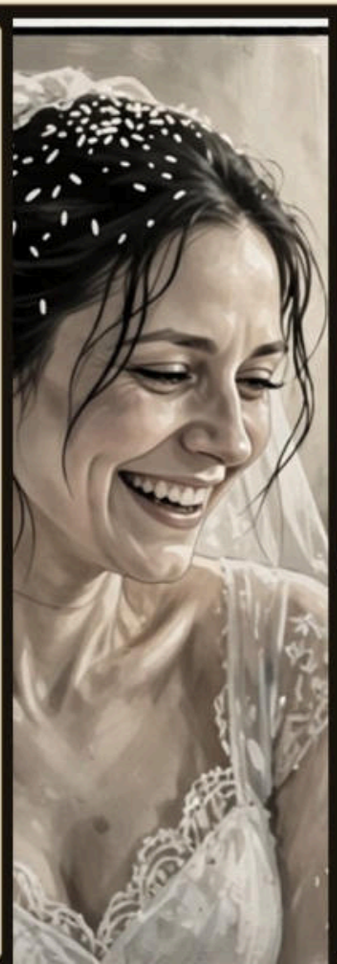
She lined them up edge to edge on the table, precise as tiles, and left them there.

4

Nora (to the table, not him):

She ate half a cracker. That's all she'd take.

She'd been doing that — talking to the room, like saying it to Ray directly would make it a conversation, and conversations had conclusions.





5

He thought about all the versions of Nora he'd known, and how this one — the one with the small getting-smaller handwriting — was a version he was meeting for the first time.



1
Twenty. He hadn't counted them on purpose. He'd just counted them.



2
Same field. Same blue sky, sealed edge to edge. Same figure in the same corner. Twenty drawings, and the little standing shape hadn't shifted a quarter inch. Like she'd stamped it.

3
It wasn't drawing, the way he understood drawing. It was manufacturing. The same thing, made the same way, twenty times. And the figure in the corner, placed, not doodled. Placed the way you'd place a mark on a map.

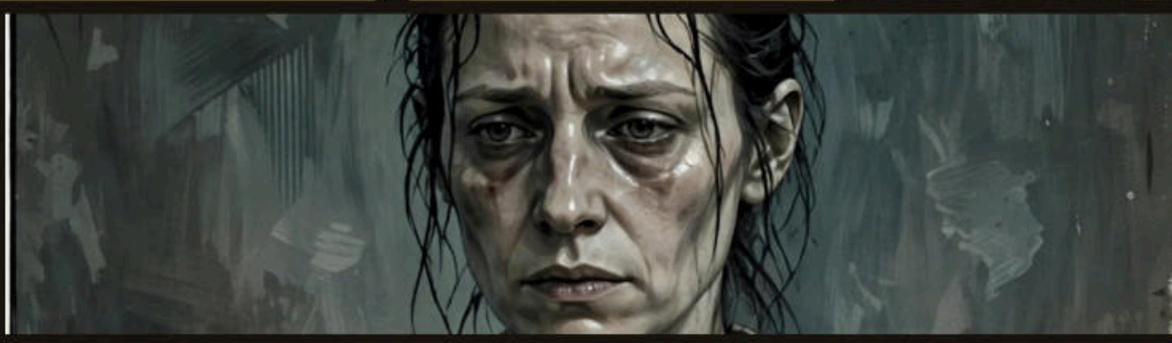




4
Ray: I'm sleeping in here tonight.

Nora: Ray—

Ray: On the floor. I'll bring the blanket from the couch. Somebody should be in here.



5
She didn't argue. That was the worst part. A week ago she'd have argued. Now she just absorbed it. She'd stopped fighting him because she'd stopped believing there was anything to fight for except the small precise motions.



1

In-two-three, out-two-three. Nora's hand found the doorframe and gripped it, and Ray saw her knuckles go white.

2

He'd painted this room yellow when she was six. He stood in the doorway now and understood that the room was a museum. Everything in it belonged to a girl who'd lived here before the staircase of numbers.





3

Marta: How is she?

Ray: 102.4.



4

Marta: Vitamins. One a day, with water.

Ray (feeling the pill bottle through the paper):

What kind of vitamins?

Marta: The kind that help. Don't give her more than one. And Ray — don't tell anybody I gave you these. I don't have enough for everybody.



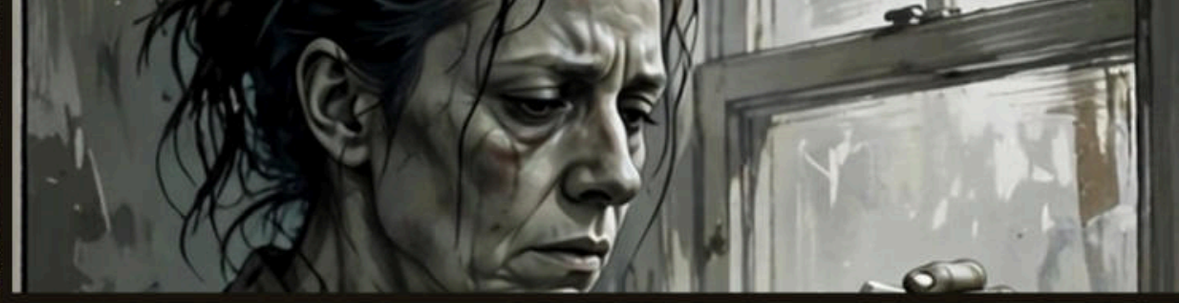
5

Which wasn't like her at all.

1

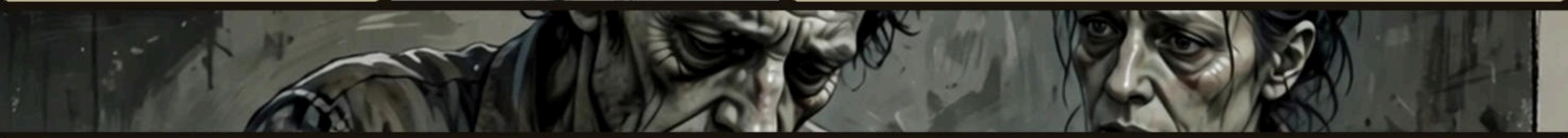
At the stop sign — the one nobody stopped at anymore — Marta stopped. Full stop. And turned and looked back down the street, straight at his house, for a long moment.





2

These didn't look like vitamins.



3

Nora: Those aren't vitamins.

Ray: No. Probably not.

Nora: There's no imprint. Vitamins have imprints. She's giving out unlabeled medication, Ray.

She set the tablet down on the counter precisely, in the center of a tile, like evidence.



4

Ray: One a day, with water. That's what the nurse said.

Nora looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded, once. That was Bellamy now: you took what the nurse gave you and you didn't ask.



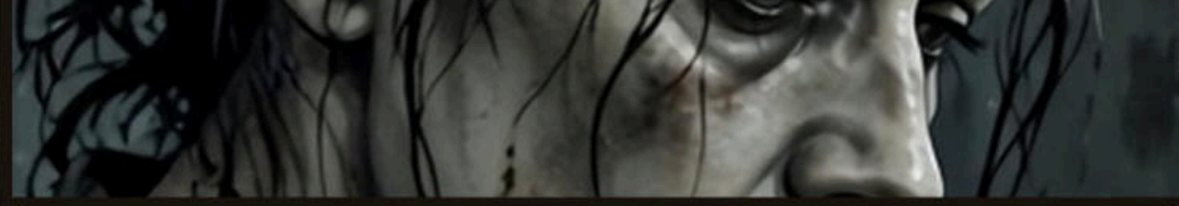
5

He stood there a moment with the cabinet door open, looking at the little amber bottle among the cans, and then he closed it.



1

They'd stopped touching casually sometime in the spring — not out of coldness, out of something worse. Out of the understanding that every touch had become a question neither of them could answer.



2

Nora: Did you eat?

Ray: Yeah.

Nora: She asked for you. Before she went under. She asked if you were coming.

Ray: I'll be in there tonight.



3

Nora: Ray. Those pills.

Ray: I know.

Nora: If they hurt her—

Ray (too fast): They won't. Marta wouldn't give us something that would hurt her.

He didn't believe himself. They sat on the porch steps in the dark and didn't say anything else, because they'd run out of things to say that weren't lies.



4

The door was between him and the hallway, and the bed was between him and the window, and Ellie was breathing, and that was the whole geometry of the world now.



5

The stillness had a texture. It wasn't the absence of sound. It was the presence of something quiet. Like a room where somebody's holding their breath.

1

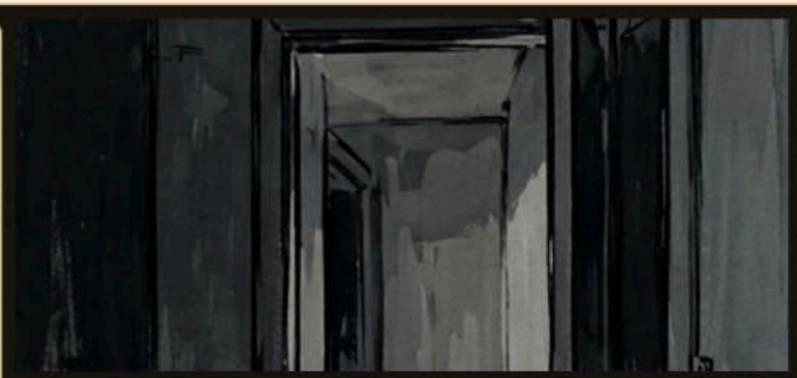
Ellie: Thank you, Daddy.

He froze with the glass in his hand. For a second — one clear second — she'd been there. Like the person she'd been before the staircase.



2

He filed it away with the crayon row and the stamped figure and the writing under the writing, in the drawer in his head that was getting too full.



3

Ellie: Daddy?

Ray (sitting up, hand on her forehead — sidewalk-hot):

I'm here, baby. You need water?



4

Ellie: I had the dream again.

Ray: What dream?

Ellie: The field one. The Humming Man was there. He was singing. Not words, just—

Ray felt the hair on his arms stand up, because he knew that sound. He'd been hearing it through the wall for two nights.

5

Ray: The humming.

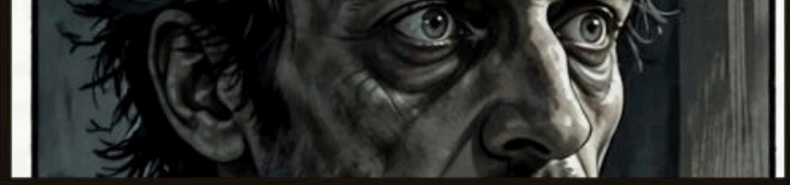
Ellie: You hear it too? The Humming Man sings it to all of us. In the dream. All the kids.

Ray's mouth was dry. "What do you mean, all the kids?" "Just — all of us." "It's nice, Daddy. It's like being rocked."

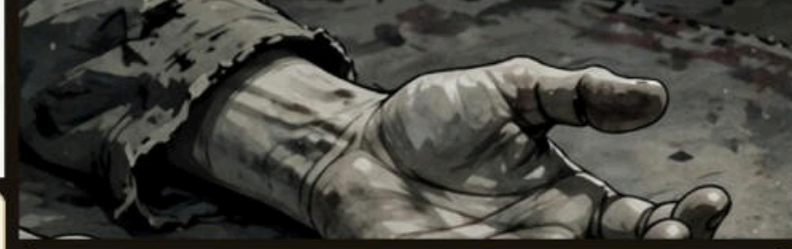




1
Through the wall — from the direction of the field — came the humming. Faint. Patient. Like something with all the time in the world.



2
He understood, with a clarity that scared him, that he wasn't guarding the room against something coming in. He was guarding himself against going out. Against walking to that window and looking. Against knowing.



3
He'd been a man who fixed things. You opened the hood, you found the problem, you fixed it. Now he didn't want to open the hood. He wanted the hood to stay closed forever.

4
When the sun came up it was gone, like it had never been there, and Ellie was asleep with her fever at 102.1 — down a tenth, the first time it had gone down.



5
A tenth was nothing. A tenth was a rounding error. A tenth was the difference between drowning and not drowning, and Ray stood there and told himself it was the vitamins, because the alternative was that something out in the field had decided to give her back a tenth of a degree.

1

Neither of them said a word about the tenth of a degree, because saying it out loud would have made it real, and real things could be taken away.

2

The dust came first. Not moving the way wind moves dust but rolling slow and deliberate, the way something heavy moves when it's in no hurry.

3

Shapes meant vehicles, and vehicles in column meant somebody coming on purpose. Not one truck. A convoy.





4

He didn't know why. The gun hadn't been fired in three years. But his hands did it anyway, oiling old habit.



5

Nora: What's happening?

Ray: Somebody's coming from Dunmore.

"Keep her inside. Keep the doors locked." She didn't wave. She'd stopped waving when he left the house, sometime in the spring.



1

They weren't scared of the trucks. They were scared of what they'd do about the trucks.

2

That was the first wrong thing: they'd driven past it. Past the line.





3

Harlan: I'm Harlan Voss. I own the hardware store over in Dunmore. And we've got the names of your sick. Thirty-one households. We know who's coughing over here.

Somebody had been counting. Somebody had been watching.



4

Alden: We're Christians here. We don't burn our neighbors.

Harlan (like to a child):

You got till Sunday. Burn your sick, or we burn the town.

The words landed in the heat and just sat there. A crow called once, and then stopped like it had thought better of it.



5

Harlan: Sunday.

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. The men got back in their trucks and drove east, the dust hanging in the air long after the sound was gone. Nobody moved for a full minute.

1

They argued about it for three days. Everywhere people could stand close enough to keep their voices down. This had a deadline.

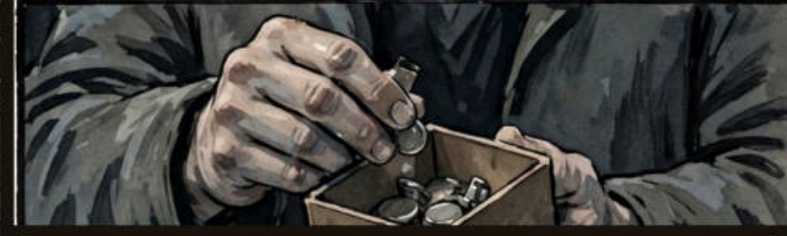




2

Clem: They come back, they find out what a small town does to bullies.

He cleaned his rifle on the porch where everybody could see him doing it. It was a statement. Everything was a statement now.



3

Ray: You think they'll come?

Clem (not looking up):

A man who drives twelve miles with a burning barrel in his truck ain't doing it for show. You got shells for that scattergun of yours?

Ray: Probably.

Clem: Probably don't cut it, Ray. Sunday. You make sure probably turns into yes.



4

He stood there looking at both of them, the way you'd look at a bill you couldn't pay.



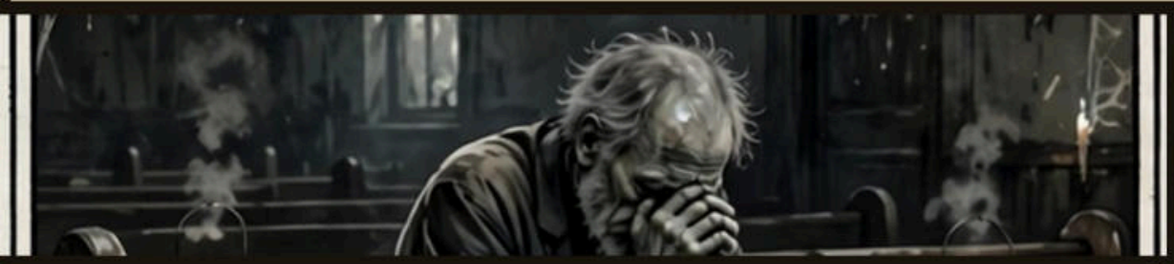
5

Alden: We turn the other cheek and we trust the Lord.

Afterward people stood in the parking lot not wanting to go home, like the church was the only place the deadline didn't apply.



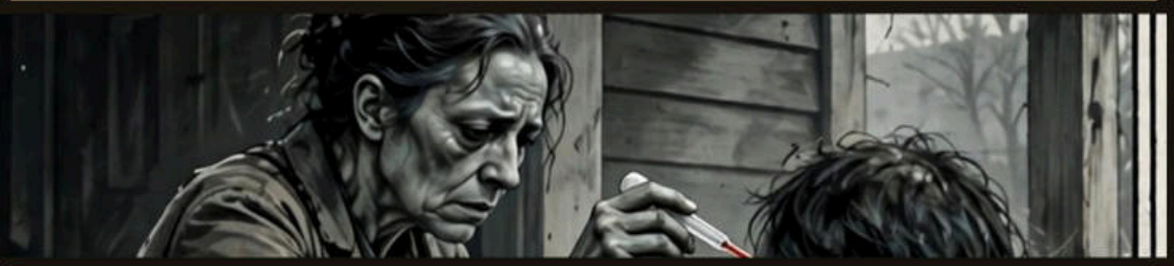
1
He thought about turning the other cheek, and he didn't know what the other cheek looked like when the first one had a shotgun pointed at it.



2
When Ray left, Alden was still up front, sitting in the first pew with his head in his hands, not praying anymore. Just sitting.



3
Dale Whitaker said nothing at all, which was the most frightening response of any of them. He sat on his porch and watched the road, like he was counting something.



4
He understood that Marta was keeping two sets of books. The official ones, with the numbers. And the real ones, whatever they were.



5
Cole Pruitt walked to the town limits alone and stood at the sign for an hour, staring east. His hands hung at his sides. The wind moved his shirt.



1

Ray: They're not coming.

Cole didn't answer. After a while Ray drove on, and in the rearview Cole was still there, still staring east, getting smaller.



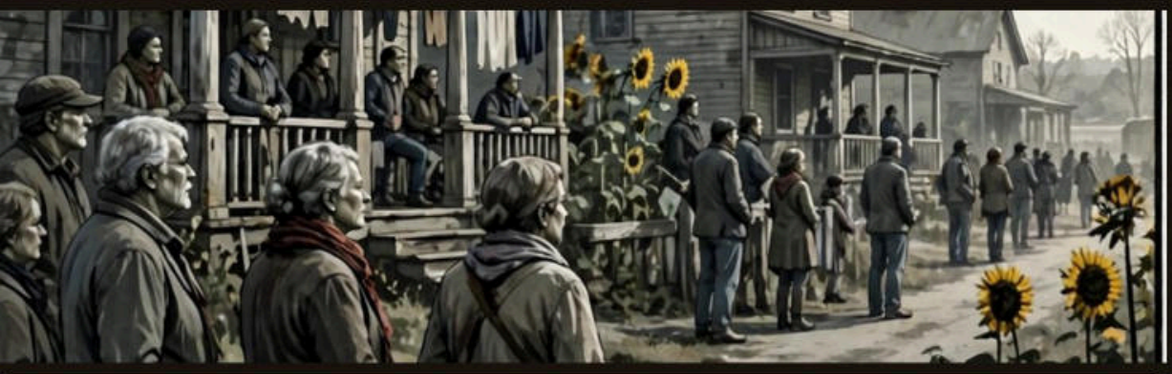
2

Ray woke before dawn and listened for trucks. Nothing happened.



3

He thought about the shotgun in the closet. Eleven shells. He thought about the promise, and the waiting, and how the waiting had turned out to be its own kind of burning.



4

Like sunflowers tracking something that wasn't there.

5

Clem: Maybe they thought better of it.

Ray: Maybe.

Neither of them believed it.





1

The adults watched with the particular expression adults had started wearing — love and arithmetic at the same time, counting.



2

Just stopped, mid-run, and stood there looking east, down the empty road.



3

Then he shook his head and ran back into the game.

4

Ray: Ellie?

Ellie (small): Nothing.

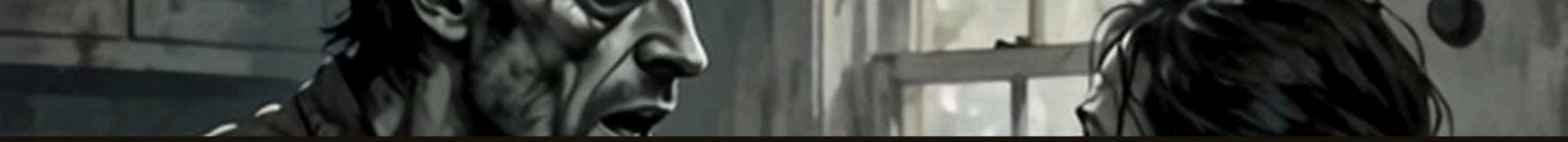
But her voice was small.





5

Nothing happened.



1

He told Nora he was going to check the shop. He drove past the shop.



2

Not-knowing had become a weight he couldn't carry. Three days of waiting for men who hadn't come, and the waiting had turned out to be worse than the threat, because at least the threat had a shape.

3

Sign: NO ONE IN. NO ONE OUT.

The paint was fresh enough to shine. Somebody in Fairgrove had decided, and decided recently, and decided for everyone.





4

The map was filling up with lines. Pretty soon there wouldn't be anywhere left to go.



5

The Dunmore roadblock wasn't there. Just the road, running into town past the water tower. He drove down Main Street with his hands tight on the wheel.



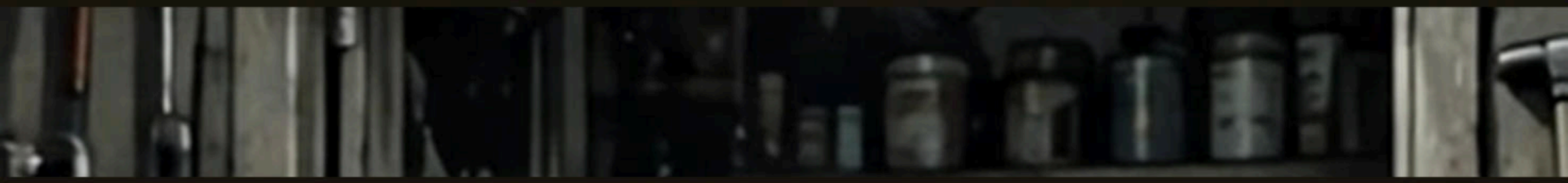
1
Doors standing open. That was the first thing. Nobody in the street. No dogs. No smoke from chimneys.

2
Laundry on a line, moving in the wind — somebody's sheets, somebody's shirts, with nobody to take them down.





3
Not quiet — nothing. No hum of wires, no distant engines, no voices, no coughing. The absence of people, and it had a texture, like a held breath.



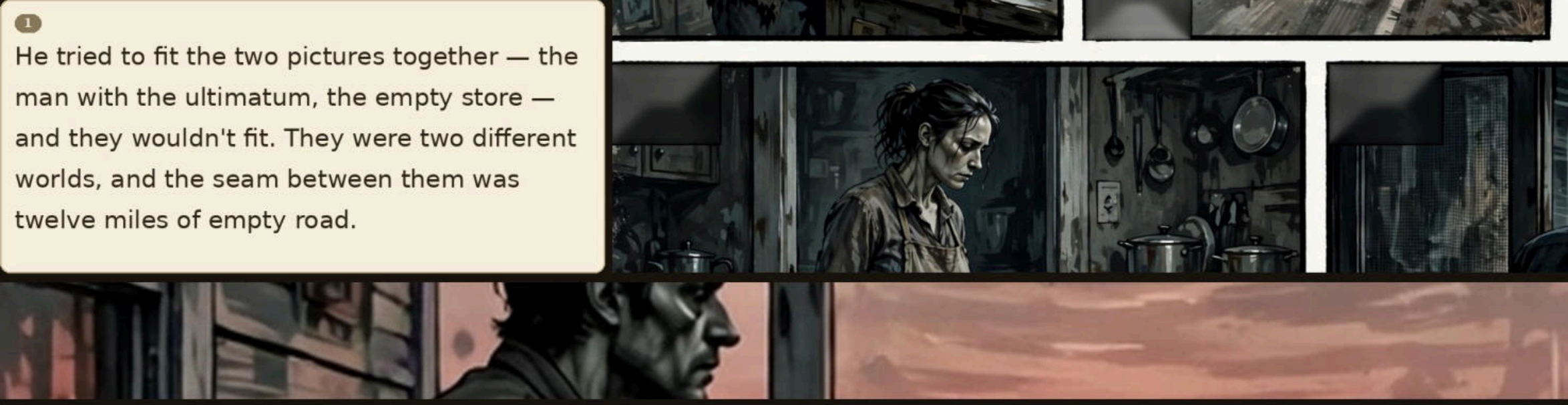
4
He didn't go in. He stood there looking at the mug for a long time. Somebody had set it down and walked out and left the door open.



5
Nobody had taken the money. Whatever had gone through Dunmore, it hadn't been interested in money.

1

He tried to fit the two pictures together — the man with the ultimatum, the empty store — and they wouldn't fit. They were two different worlds, and the seam between them was twelve miles of empty road.



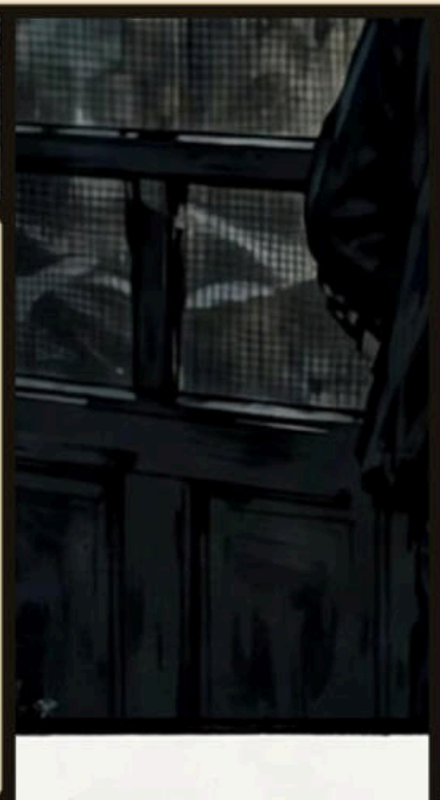
2

He got back in his truck and drove home, and he didn't stop until he was past Bellamy's sign.



3

He didn't tell the town. He didn't tell Nora. He sat on the porch and kept the stone in his chest, and he told himself it was to keep people calm, and the truth was uglier: he didn't know what the empty town meant, and he was afraid that saying it out loud would make it mean something.



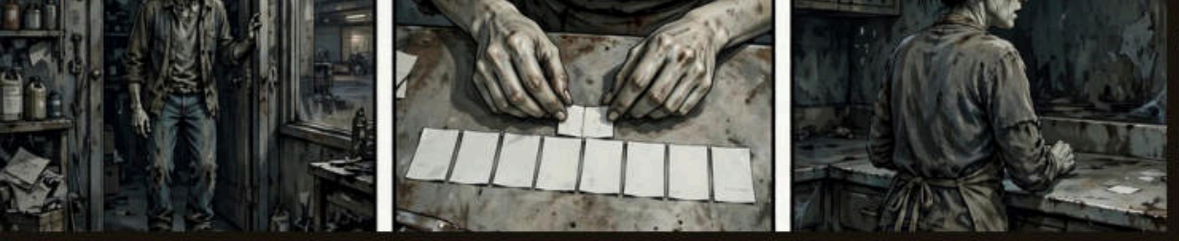
4

She didn't ask. She went back inside.



5

From Ellie's room, through the screen, came the sound of her sleeping. And underneath it — louder than it had been, closer than it had been — the humming.



1

The secret sat in Ray's chest like a swallowed stone. Three days of not telling Nora, not telling anybody, carrying it around like a hot coal in his pocket.



2

The slips had become a kind of rosary — something to touch, something to count, something to hold onto when the big things wouldn't hold.



3

Nora: She asked for toast. She ate half a piece.

Ray: That's good.

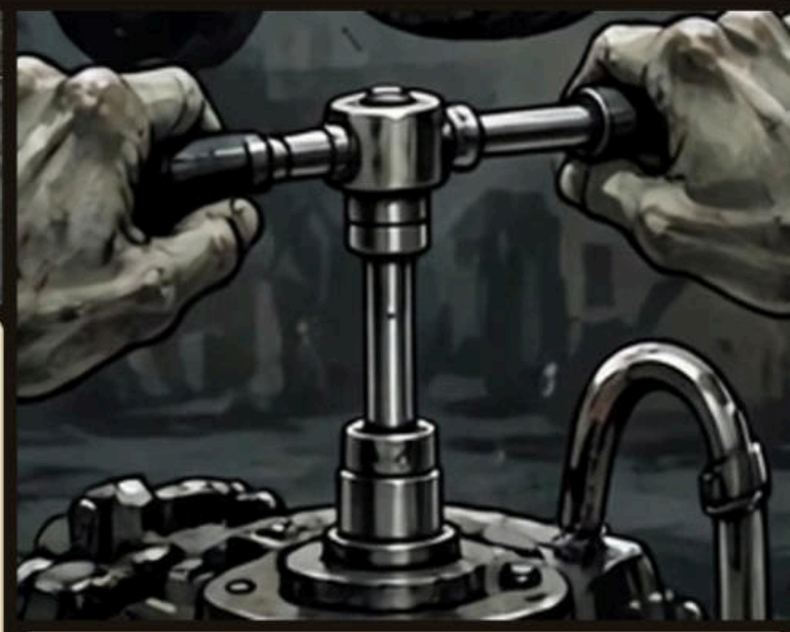
Nora: It's something. Marta's coming by at ten. She wants to check her.



4

Radio: ...the sickness is now present in forty-one states, moving across the nation like weather...

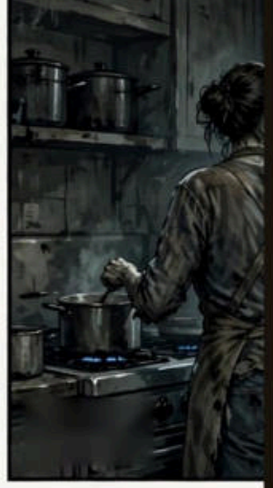
Ray stood in the empty bay and listened, and he thought about Dunmore — doors open, laundry moving, nobody left — and he understood that weather was exactly right. You didn't negotiate with weather.



5

It wasn't worth fixing, and Ray fixed it anyway. That was the shop now: work that didn't matter, done carefully, because doing it carefully was the point.





1

He thought about not going to the meeting. But Alden had called it, and Alden was trying, and a man showed up when the preacher called a meeting.



2

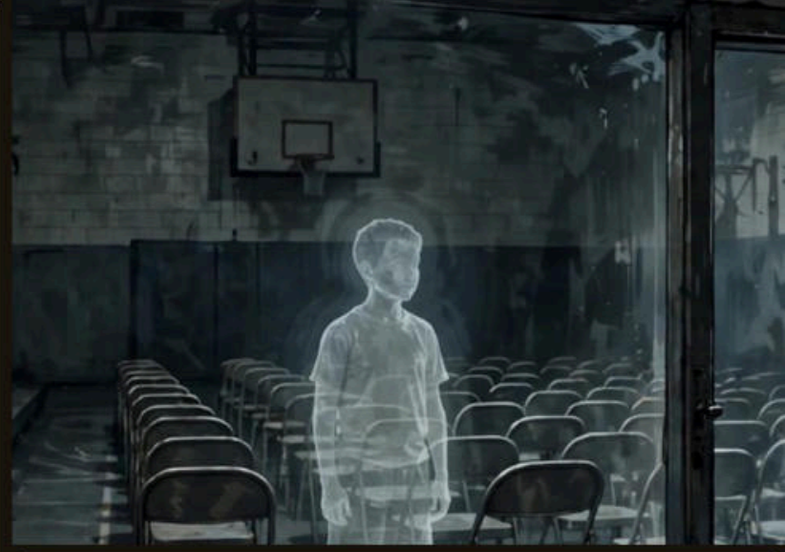
Nora: Marta says 101.9. Holding.

Ray: Good.

Nora: You're going to the meeting.

Ray: Yeah.

She turned then. The look that said she knew he was carrying something and had decided not to ask yet.



3

Nora: Be careful.

It wasn't I love you. It wasn't come home safe. It was be careful, and it landed like all three.



4

He'd played ball in this gym. Twenty years ago. He stood in the doorway and thought about how a room could hold two completely different worlds, and how the seam between them was just time.

5

People filed in quietly, the way people went to funerals.







1

Marta: Thirty-one households with active fever. That's up from twenty-six last week. Nine dead since Sunday. Four of them children.

The gym went quiet in the particular way of people doing arithmetic they didn't want to do.





2

Ray thought about the north row in the churchyard, getting longer. He thought about Ellie at home with her 101.9, holding, and the line they were holding, and how thin it was.

3

He thought about standing up and saying it — there's nobody left in Dunmore — and he thought about what would happen if he did. He didn't stand up. He stared at the scuffed gym floor and kept the stone where it was.

4

Clem: We gonna talk about Dunmore, or we gonna pretend?

A ripple went through the chairs. Ray's hands tightened on his knees. Nobody knew about Dunmore. Nobody but him.





5

Clem: They were supposed to come Sunday. They didn't come. Now the road's gone quiet. Has anybody been out there? Has anybody even looked?

Dale (quiet): I drove past the turnoff Tuesday. Didn't see nothing moving.



1

Marta: We have enough to worry about here without borrowing trouble from twelve miles away.

It should have ended there. It didn't.



2

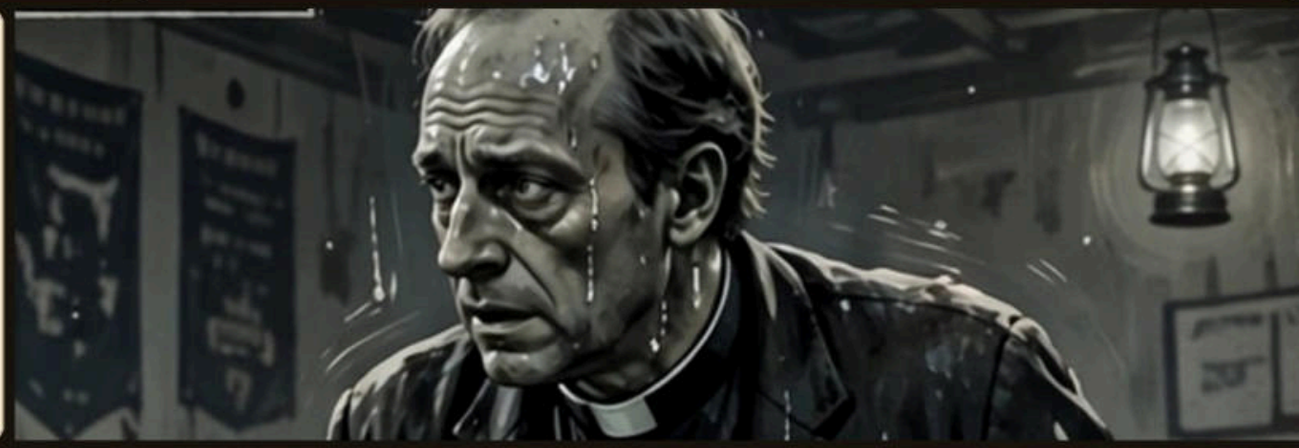
Linda: Can I say something? It's about the dreams.

The gym got very still. Ray felt it in his spine before his mind caught up — the particular stillness of a room full of people who've all been keeping the same secret.

3

Linda: My boy. He's been dreaming about a field. Every night for a week. He says there's humming in it. I know how it sounds.

Nobody laughed. That was the thing Ray would remember later — nobody laughed, nobody even shifted.

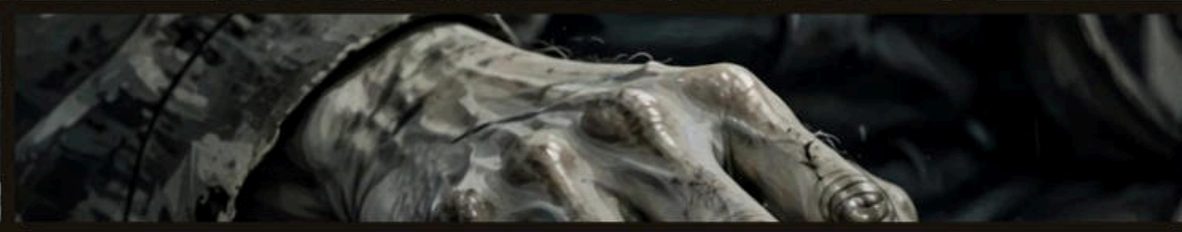




4

Dana (barely audible): My girl dreams it too. The field. The humming.

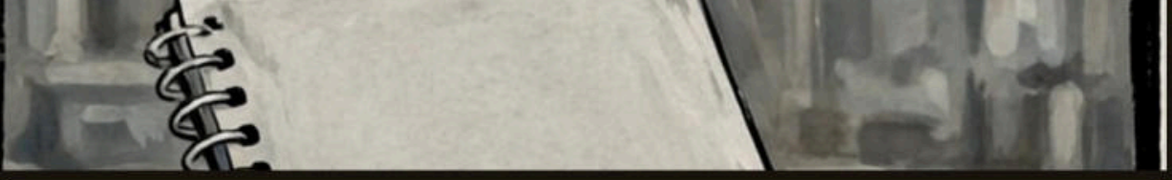
He understood that there was more — that she'd started to say the easy part and the hard part was still coming.



5

Dana: She asked me when we get to go there. This morning. She said — "Mama, when do we get to go to the field?" Like it was a trip we'd planned. Like I'd promised.

The gym was so quiet Ray could hear the lanterns hissing.



1

Miller: My boy drew it. The field. He's been drawing it for a week. There's a man in it. In the corner. Real small. I asked him who it was and he said — "That's where he stands."

He put his cap on and took it off again. Ray thought about Ellie's twenty drawings, and the floor tilted under his chair.

2

Wren hadn't said a word. But her hand had stopped moving in her daughter's hair, and Ray understood that she was hearing her own house described back to her.







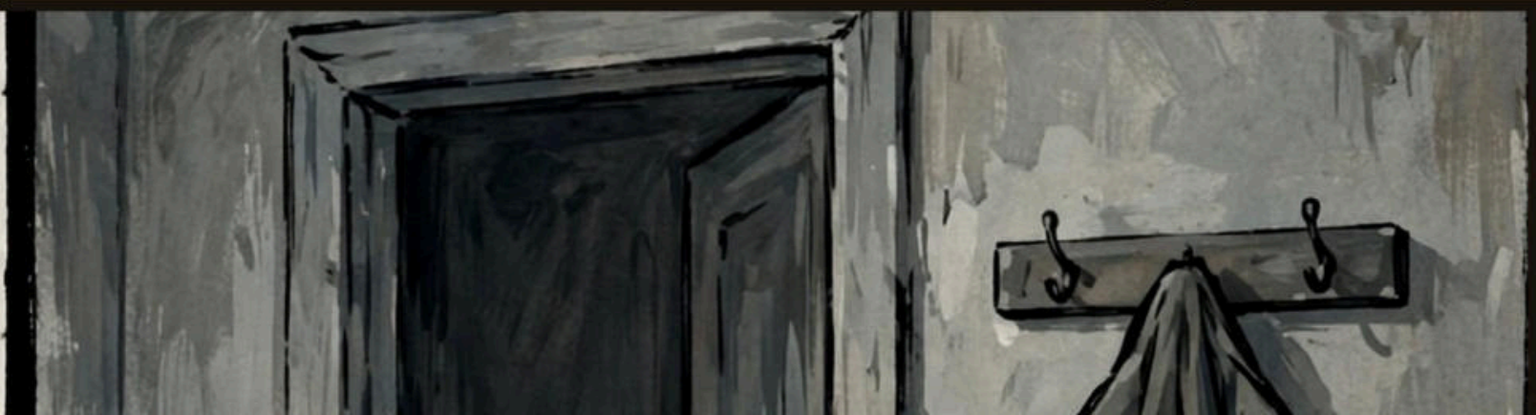
3

Alden: What do they say about it? The children. What do they say?

Linda (sitting slowly): He says it's nice. He calls him the Humming Man. He says it's like being rocked.

4

A kid's name for it. The kind of name a nine-year-old gives something he can't explain. Kids named things to make them safe.



5

His fingers had found the rhythm — the rocking rhythm, up and down, the shape of the humming — on their own. He didn't know the song. He'd never learned it. His fingers had tapped it anyway.

1

Marta: All of them.

It wasn't a question. Dana nodded. Linda nodded. Three more mothers nodded without being asked. And then Wren — Wren who hadn't said a word — nodded too, once, her hand starting to move again in her daughter's hair, slow and automatic.

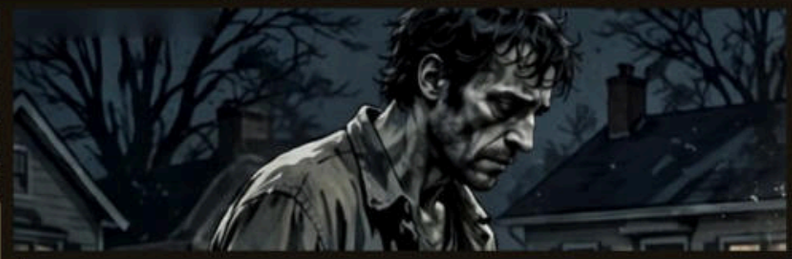




2

Clem: No plan. That's what this meeting is. No plan, just fear.

He stood up and walked out, boots loud on the gym floor. A few others followed — men, mostly, men who needed something to hit.



3

They'd come here for a plan. They were leaving with a field. Most stayed sitting, like they were waiting for somebody to tell them what the nodding meant. Nobody told them.



4

Thirty-one households. Nine dead. Four children. All the kids dreaming the same field.



5

Halfway home, from an open window down the street, he heard it. A kid, humming in the dark. That tune. The one nobody taught.



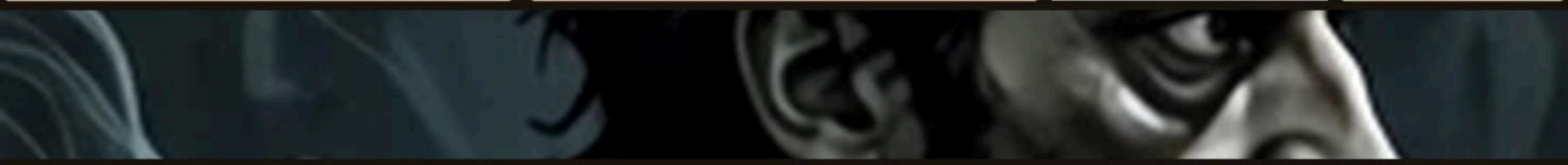
1
Two children, in two dark houses, humming the same song nobody taught them, in the dark, in the middle of the night.



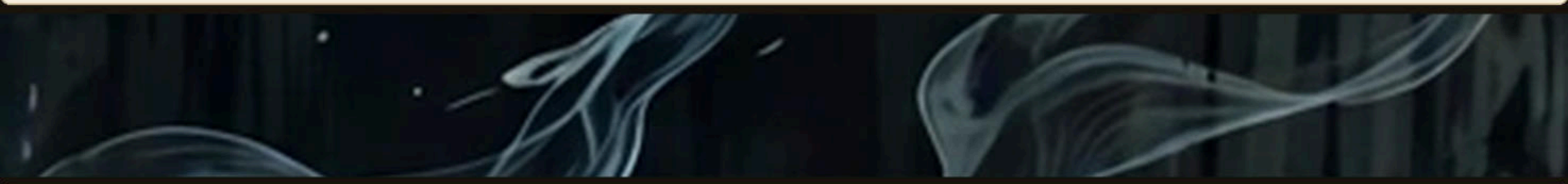
2
He stopped walking. The two voices stopped too — mid-note, both of them, like they'd been cut with a knife.



3
He walked faster. He didn't run. He told himself he didn't run.



4
He sat there a long time. He thought about the two voices stopping mid-note when he stopped walking.



5
The stone was still in his chest. Dunmore, empty, twelve miles east. And sitting in the armchair with the humming coming from everywhere and nowhere, he understood that the secret didn't matter anymore. Whatever was happening in Bellamy wasn't coming from Dunmore. Dunmore was just the first place it had finished with.

1

He'd told Nora he was checking on the shop's fuel drum, which was a lie, and she'd known it was a lie, and she'd let him go anyway.



2

Fourteen years of marriage and she'd never once let him go that easy, and he understood, driving east, that she'd known where he was really going all along and she hadn't wanted to be the one who sent him.



3

The sawhorses stood across the highway where Dunmore's men had put them three weeks ago. Nobody manning them. Nobody to man them.



4

He stood on the empty highway for a long time, looking at those sawhorses, and remembered the Saturday they'd gone up.

5

Ellie had been fine that morning — out in the yard with a stick, conducting the ants like an orchestra, not a cough on her.



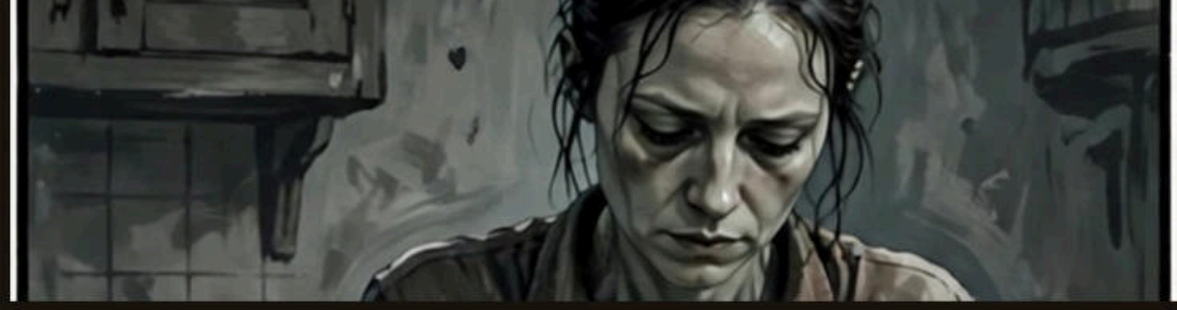


1

Nora: She ate half a piece of toast. Wants the crusts cut off again.

Ray: She's six. Crusts are a mortal enemy.

Nora almost smiled. Almost.



2

Nora: Wren called. Her girl hit 103 last night.

Ray didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say to 103.



3

Nora: Marta says the twins are holding at 101. She told me something. About the bodies. The ones at the churchyard. She says they stay warm. Hours after. Like the fever doesn't leave when they do. Did she tell you that?

Ray: She mentioned it.

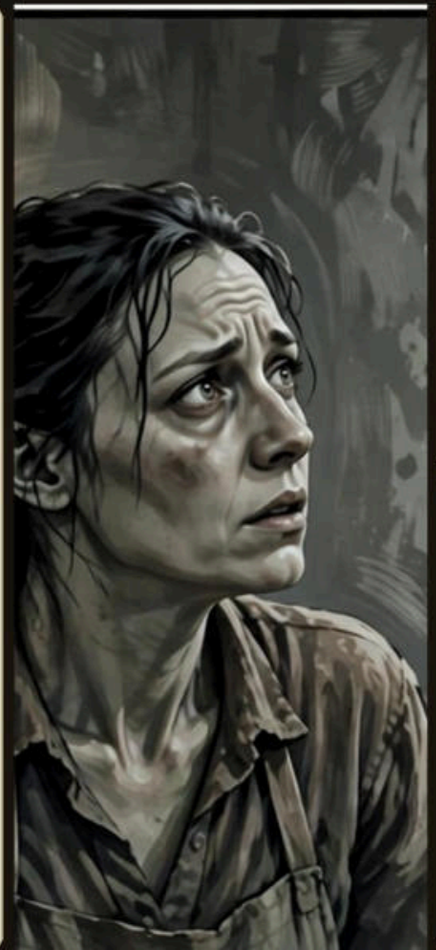
It wasn't quite a lie.

4

Nora: What's that mean, Ray?

Ray: I don't know.

He thought about saying it was the fever, the way everybody said it was the fever, but Nora would hear the shape of the dodge.





5

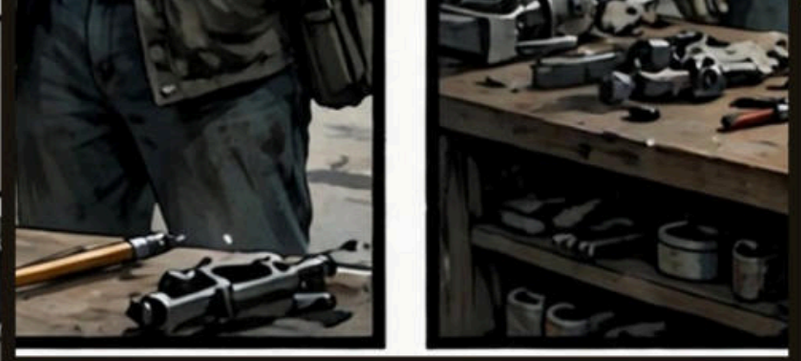
Nora: The county health office isn't picking up. I tried yesterday. And Thursday. The line just rings. Where is everybody, Ray?

He didn't have an answer for that one either.



1

Clem: They blocked the highway. Dunmore. Sawhorses across both lanes, men with rifles. They're not letting anybody through.



2

Ray: Through to where? There's nowhere to go.

Clem: That's not the point. The point is they decided, just like that, that we're on the wrong side of something.

Clem paced — three steps one way, three steps back — and the small office rocked like a boat.

3

Ray (quiet):

We are the sick ones.

Clem: You watch your mouth.

The radio man kept reading numbers underneath the silence, patient and unbothered, listing counties like rain chances.





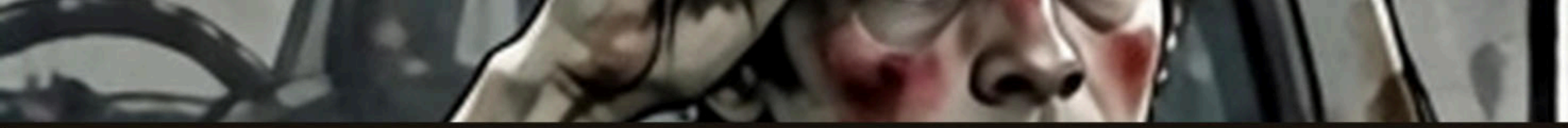
4

Not to fight. Just to see. That was what he'd told himself.



5

The metal was burning his palms and he didn't move his hands. He wanted the burn. It gave him something to pay attention to that wasn't the rifles.



1

Petey sat across from Ray — twenty-two, scared and loud on ordinary days, quiet now in a way that made him look younger.

2

Somebody had taken care with them. That was the strangest part, looking back. Somebody had taken care.





3

Clem: We're neighbors. We share a football rivalry and nothing else, but we're neighbors.

Harlan (arms crossed, flat): Neighbors stay home when they're sick. You've got it over there. We've seen the numbers. You stay on your side, we stay on ours.



4

He couldn't have been older than Petey. Ray noticed the way he held it, high against his chest, like a man holding a door shut.



5

Petey: We're not all sick! Most of us are fine.

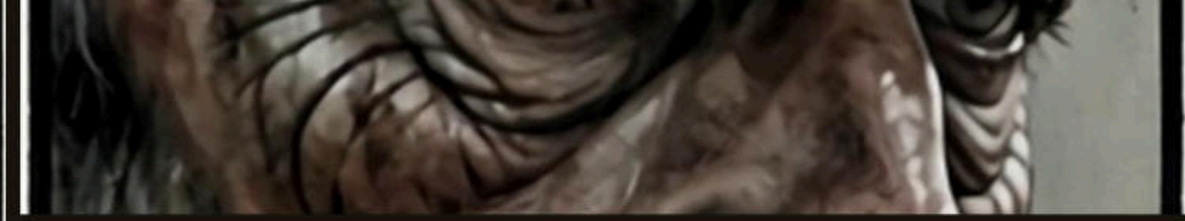
Harlan (turning his head, just looking): Everybody's fine, until they're coughing blood in a churchyard. Turn around.

1

Petey (sharp intake, cut off): —

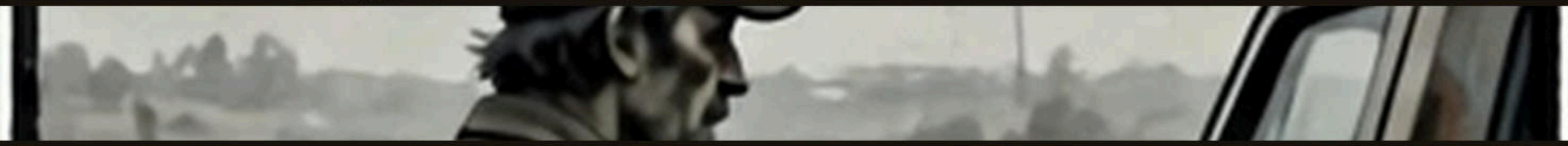
Like a man who'd walked into a door in the dark. Petey sank back down. His face had gone white under the sunburn.





2

Harlan: Harlan Voss. I own the hardware store in Dunmore. And I'm telling you as a neighbor, Clem — I've seen what this does when it gets loose in a town. You go home. You keep your sick home. We'll do the same.



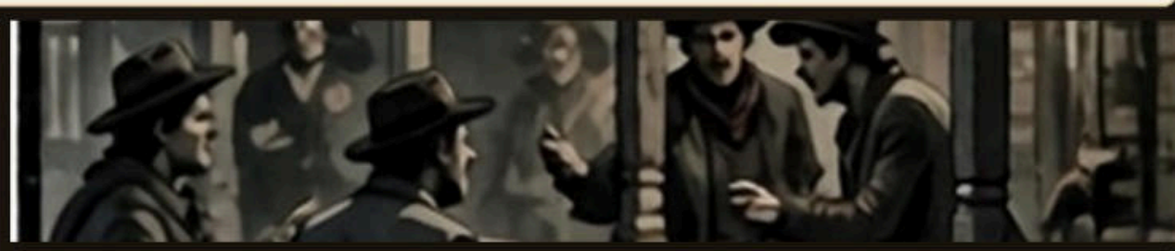
3

The man was tired — tired the way Nora was tired, the way everybody was tired that spring. There was no meanness in him. Ray had been braced for meanness. Meanness you could hate, and hating felt like doing something. But tiredness didn't give you anything to push against.



4

Nobody talked on the way home.



5

Clem (from two porches down): —decided, just like that, like we're—

Wife (sharp): Well are we or aren't we?

Old Man (slow): They got a right.

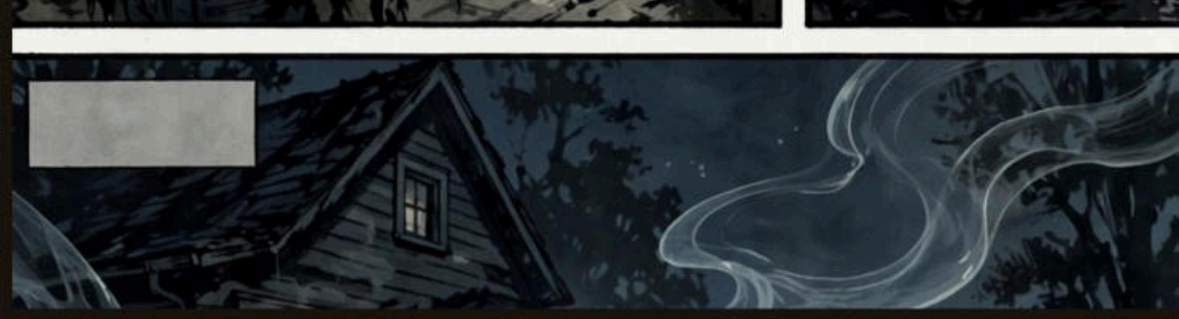
The question, sitting underneath all the talk like a stone in a shoe, was whether Bellamy would have done the same. Whether they were just angry at Dunmore for getting there first.



1

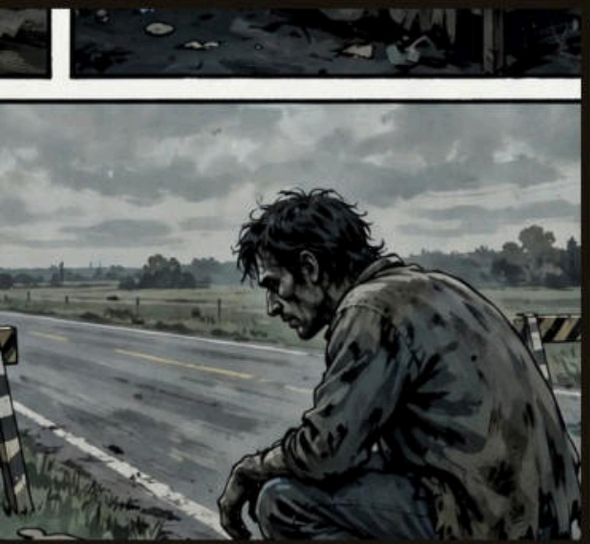
Nora (low, soothing): —

Pretty soon, he thought, the world would be exactly as big as Bellamy. And then smaller.



2

He'd been doing that for two weeks now, ever since the fever had stopped breaking in the mornings.



3

He tried to place it. A song from school. Something off the radio. Something Nora sang while she cooked. He couldn't place it. He'd never taught her that tune.



4

Outside, in the dark beyond the window, the humming went on. Not Ellie's. Bigger. Patient. Like something with all the time in the world.



5

Four man-shaped patches of dead grass, pressed into the dirt in the shape of boots and legs. In three weeks, nothing had grown back.

1

Ray knew without thinking about it which one it was: the young one, the peeling sunburn, the kid who'd held his rifle like a door.



2

Except nobody had gone home. There was no home left to go to, twelve miles east.



3

They hadn't been those people. But the line was still there. The sawhorses were still there. All it needed was somebody to stand behind it.

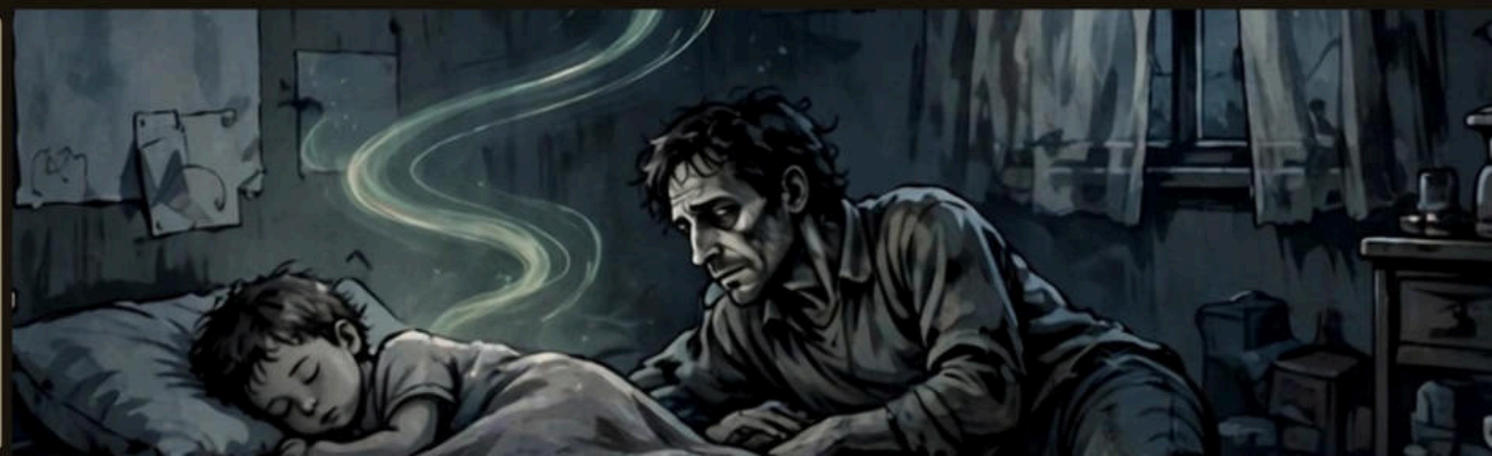


4

Harlan had been trying to keep something out. And now Harlan was dead in an empty town, and whatever he'd been trying to keep out — or in — hadn't cared about sawhorses.

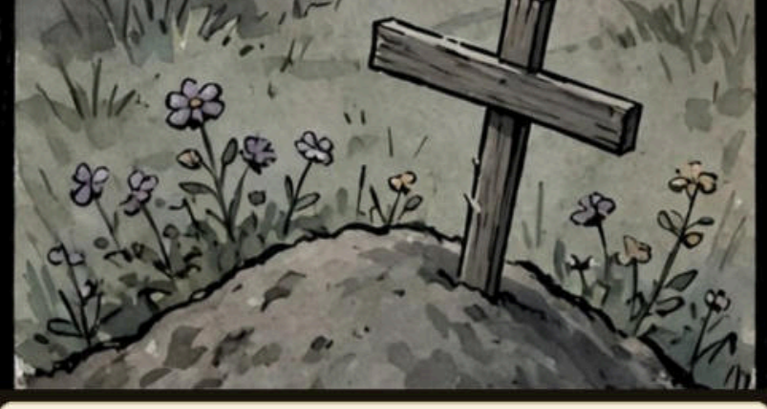
5

He understood, the way you understand something you've known for a while, that the question was never whether they were those people. The question was what it would take to make them those people.





1
Tommy Pruitt had taken sick two weeks after his brother's funeral. Four days from first cough to the grave — cough, fever, the sleep that wasn't sleep.



2
Ray had watched it happen from the edges, the way everybody watched it happen now.



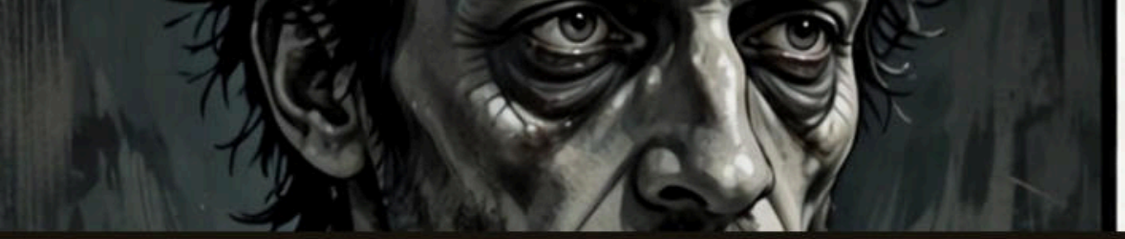
3
Cole Pruitt buried his second son on a Tuesday. This time Cole stood alone with his hands in his pockets, and Ray understood that the man had used up whatever crying was in him on the first one.

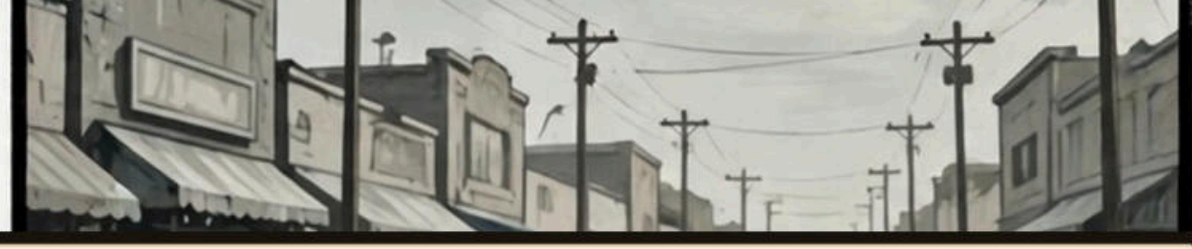
4
At Danny's burial, Tommy had stood at the edge of the grave in his bare feet — ten years old, not crying, just watching. The kid's bare feet in the dirt, patient, like he was already practicing for something.





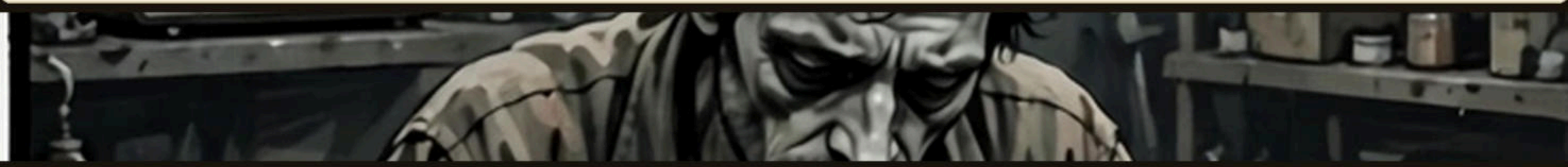
5
At Louise's burial she'd said it out loud. This time she just folded the sheet back over the small face a little faster than usual. And her hands — Ray noticed, because he noticed hands — didn't shake at all.





1

That struck him the way things struck him that spring and then got filed away unexamined, because there was no room to examine them. Marta's hands had shaken at Danny's burial. Now they were steady as stone.



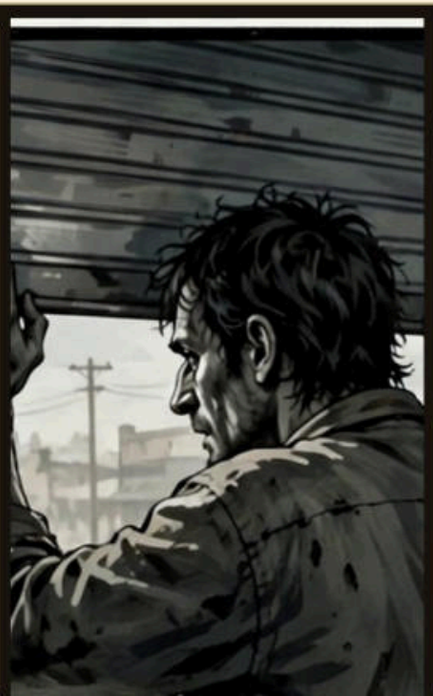
2

That was Tuesday. On Thursday, Tommy Pruitt walked up Main Street.

3

SCREAM—

The kind of sound a person makes when their throat closes around it halfway out.





4

Main Street was never silent. Now there was nothing. The silence had a weight to it. It pressed on his ears.



5

He put his hands on it now and they were numb, and for a second he was afraid he wouldn't be able to get it open, that his own hands would betray him in his own shop.



1

The street was empty except for the heat shimmer and one small figure, walking up the middle of it. Tommy Pruitt. Ten years old. Three days dead.

1

Nobody came to their doors. Nobody called out. The kids didn't scream. That was the thing Ray would remember later: the kids didn't scream.





2

Behind her, Wren's hands came down on her shoulders and pulled her back, hard, and the girl disappeared from the window.



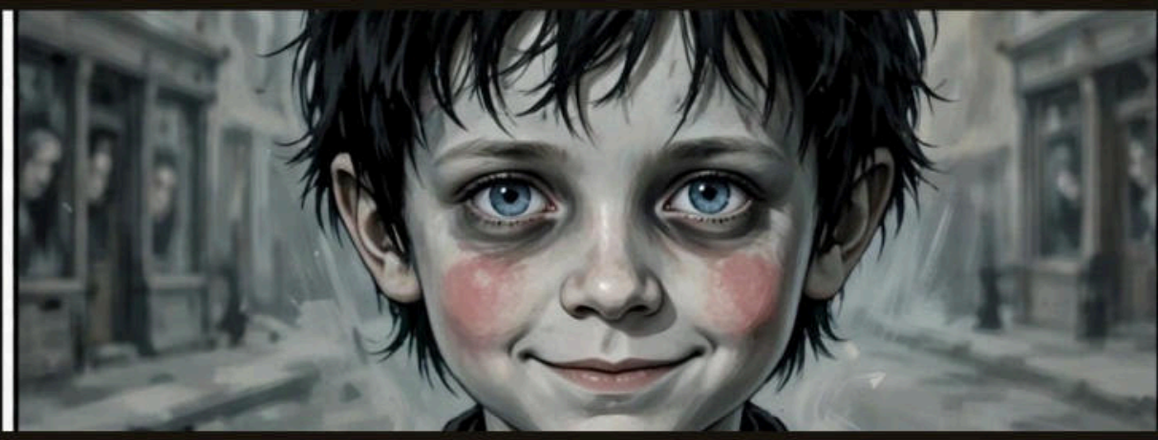
3

He hadn't looked scared. He'd looked like he was watching something he recognized.



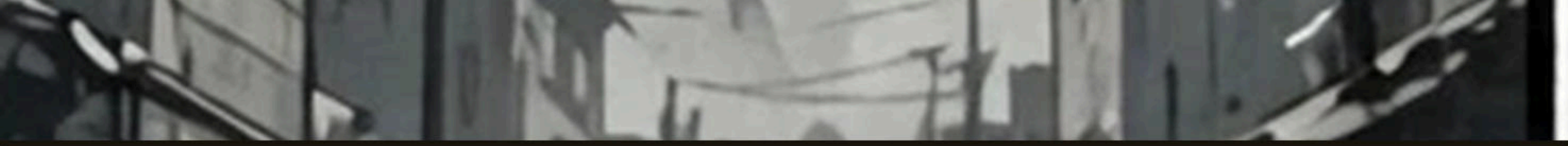
4

Ray kept coming back to the feet. Three days in the ground, and the feet were clean. He thought of Tuesday's churchyard dirt and couldn't make the two pictures fit.



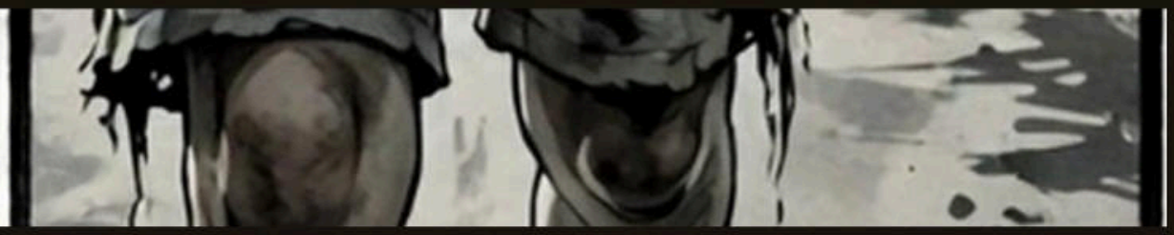
5

Healthy the way kids are supposed to be healthy, the way Ellie hadn't been healthy in weeks, the way Ray had almost forgotten healthy looked. And he was smiling. Like a boy carrying a secret too good to keep and too good to tell.



1

It was noon. Everybody's shadow should have been a dark puddle under their feet. But Tommy's shadow stretched out behind him across the asphalt — long, long, like late evening.



2

Tommy took a step, and the shadow took it half a beat later. Like it was reluctant. Like it had to be dragged along behind the boy, protesting every inch.



3

For one second his hands on the doorframe were perfectly still. Not numb. Still. The shaking just stopped, like a held breath, while he watched the boy walk up Main Street.



4

Then it came back, and he was glad. He was so glad. Shaking meant he was still himself. Shaking meant he was still alive enough to be afraid.



5

Down the street, a door opened. Cole Pruitt came out — drawn by the scream, maybe, or by some father's instinct that didn't need a sound — and stopped on his porch. And saw.



1

Cole (voice cracking, breaking on the second syllable):

Tommy? Tommy!

His second son. Three days in the ground. Walking up Main Street, healthy and smiling, in his burial clothes.

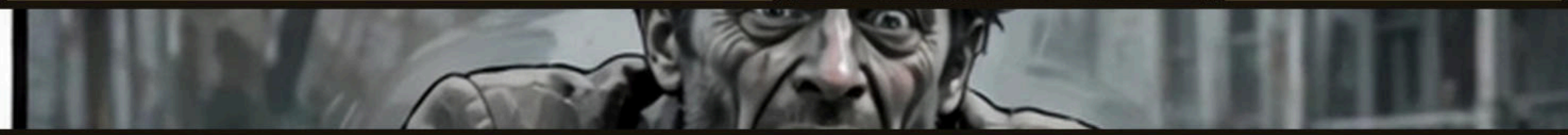


2

Tommy (pleasantly, like home from school):

Hi, Dad.

The smile didn't change. Not by a fraction. It stayed exactly where it was, small and calm and wrong, like it had been painted on.



3

Cole: Baby. Oh, baby —

Ray could see it from the shop — the way a man's face came undone when there wasn't anything left holding it together.



4

Tommy (still pleasant, still smiling):

Don't. Not yet.

Like he'd just come home from school. Like the bus had dropped him at the corner and here he was.

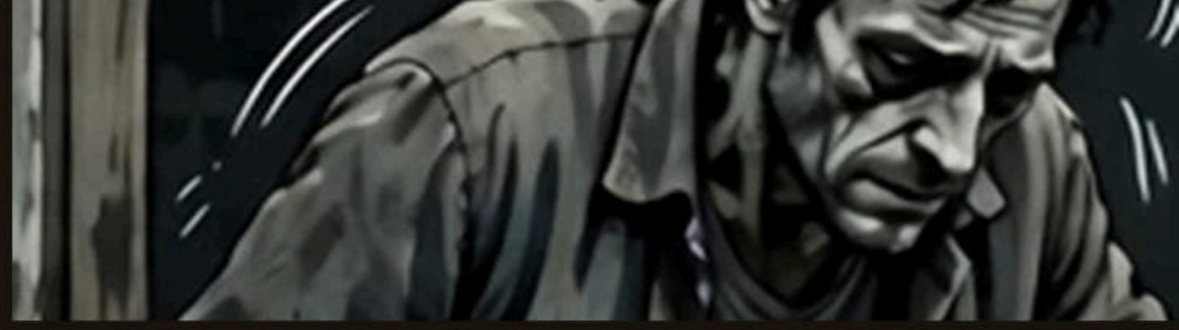
5

His bare feet made no sound on the hot asphalt. Ray listened for it — the slap of skin on pavement, anything — and there was nothing.





1
Cole sank to his knees in the middle of Main Street. He didn't make a sound. Ray understood that the man had finally found something worse than burying two sons. Burying them was an ending. This wasn't an ending.



2
That was the whole of it. Nobody followed the boy. Nobody stopped him.



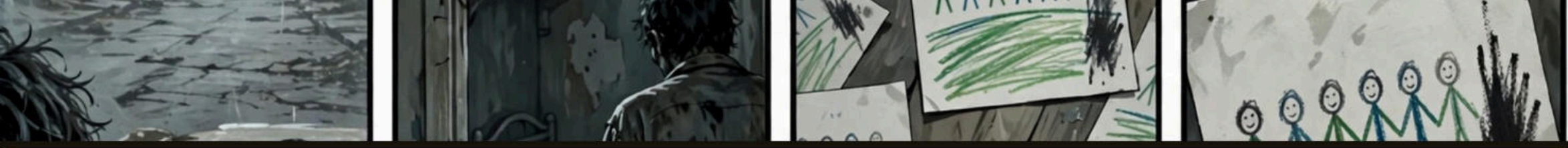
3
He was so glad it was shaking. Shaking meant he was still himself.

4
He sat in the old chair with his hands flat on his thighs and watched them shake, and he was grateful for every tremor, the way you were grateful for pain because pain meant the nerve was still alive.





5
He thought about burial clothes with the collar still pressed, and clean bare feet on hot asphalt, and the second of stillness on the doorframe — that held-breath moment — and pushed it away.



1
Halfway home he realized he was driving with both hands at ten and two, and he made himself relax, and his hand shook on his knee, faithful as ever, and he almost laughed. Almost.



2
He went straight to Ellie's room and stood in the doorway watching his daughter sleep.

3
Little stick figures standing in a row across the middle — seven, neat as fence posts — and at the edge of the field, taller than the rest, a shape with no face. Just a tall smudge of dark crayon, standing apart from the row.

4
The smudge was drawn over everything else, the dark crayon laid on last, heavier — and it was always at the east edge of the paper, every drawing the same. Like she'd stamped it.

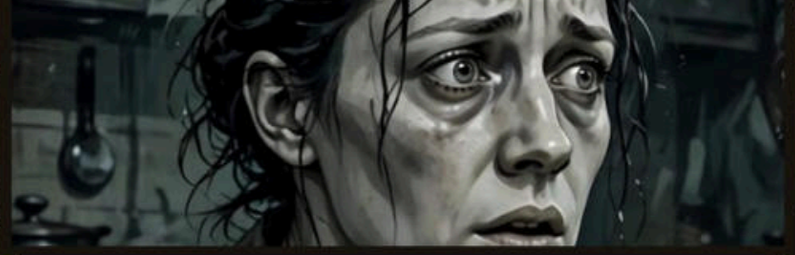


5
Climbing again, she'd written in the margin, in smaller letters, like she hadn't wanted the numbers to hear her say it.



1

He told her. He told her all of it. She listened without moving, without interrupting, her hands tightening on the glass until Ray thought it might break.



2

Nora: Did he look — Was he —

Ray: Sick? No. He looked healthy, Nora. He looked better than —

He'd been about to say better than Ellie, and he couldn't say it, not out loud, not in that kitchen.

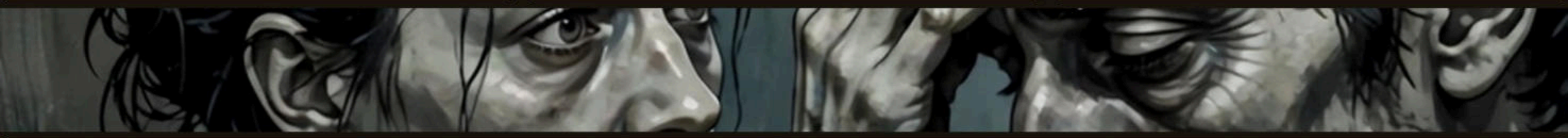


3

Nora: Where was he, Ray? For three days. Where was he?

Ray: I don't know.

There was a grave on the hill with the dirt still fresh, and a boy walking up Main Street in clean burial clothes, and nothing in between that would fit in a sentence.



4

Nora: You're cold.

Which made no sense, because he wasn't cold, he was burning up from the inside, and they both knew she wasn't checking for fever. She was checking for him. Making sure he was still in there.



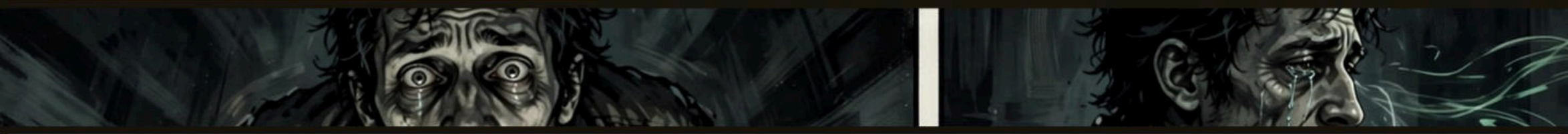
5

None of them slept, not really, not the way sleep was supposed to work.

1

That night he dreamed. For the first time in weeks, he dreamed — a field, green and endless, and humming coming up out of the ground like heat, and a tall man standing at the edge of the field, singing. Not words. Just a tune, low and patient, going on and on.





2

The tall man lifted one hand, slow, and the row straightened, and Ray understood, even in the dream, that the hand had done something to them. That it was always doing something to them.



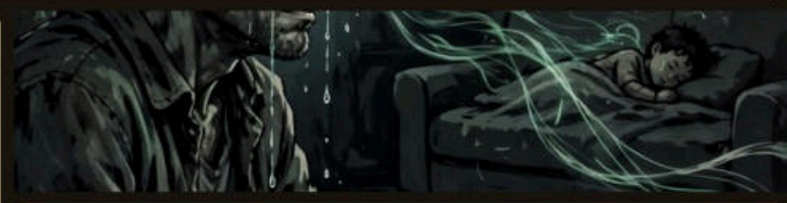
3

And then the singing stopped, and the tall man turned his head — not toward the row of kids, but toward Ray, past them, like Ray was the one he'd been waiting for — and Ray tried to wake up.



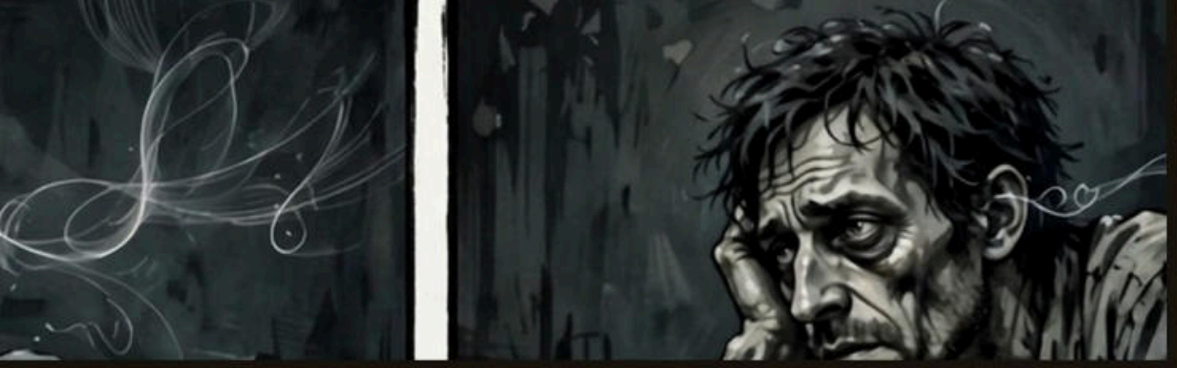
4

But the tall man's hand was still raised, and the humming went on underneath the silence like a current, and Ray couldn't move.



5

He woke up crying, and he didn't know why, and his face was wet, and the room was dark, and Ellie was humming in her sleep. The same tune. The one from the dream. The one he'd never taught her.



1

Ellie: The Humming Man.

Like she was naming a neighbor. And she hummed on.



2

Ray lay on the rug in the dark and listened to his daughter hum the tall man's song.



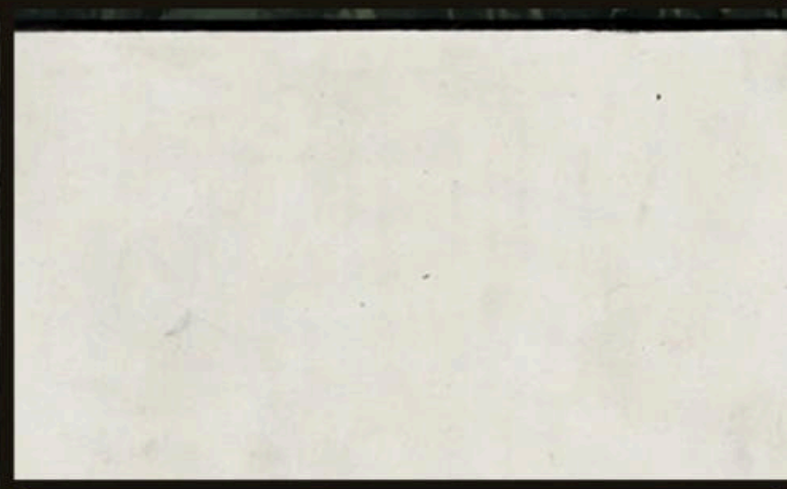
3

The crayon row. The stamped figure. The writing under the writing. Four hours dead and warm as bathwater. Hands steady as a machine. A shadow half a beat late.



4

The staircase, climbing again.



5

And out past the town limits, past Dunmore's empty streets, the field waited — green and endless — humming low and patient, like something with all the time in the world.

One last thing

This book is yours now.

Fold the corners. Underline everything. Read the ending first.

Read one page a day, or the whole thing at 2am. Both count.

Stim while you read. Take breaks. Come back when you're ready.

There are no rules here except yours.

We built this book for the way your mind actually works. So read it the way you actually live.

And if it helps you, tell someone. Somebody out there needs to hear it.

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The sickness is only the beginning.

Volume Two is coming.

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