

We weren't supposed to be in the playground, which was reserved for faculty who lived in the fifties style housing blocks nearby, but Simon's preschool used it for outdoor play, and kids from his class were always going over after. My daughter Ruby was home on spring break that week and she talked me into surprising Simon with a stop to play. Please, Daddy? You know he'll love it! And he sure did: Simon hopped up and down with excitement, and, explaining the rules—no running up the slide, and no pushing on the steps, and no playing in the water fountain—he led us into the courtyard. We waited at the iron door, after giving it a useless tug. Only one kid ran around inside and eventually Ruby waved the nanny over and she grudgingly let us in with a magnetic key.

Probably I should've wondered why no one else was there on so beautiful an afternoon, but the kids were having fun and I sat on a bench in the sun, looking at my phone, dozing off, but catching myself and checking on the kids, who were of course fine. This playground was more secure than any we'd ever been to, so I think I dozed off again, and that's how I failed to notice the nanny and her kid leaving.

During that hour of semi-wakefulness I did notice an old man up on the balcony of a fifth (I think) floor apartment. He must've been at least eighty and I remember thinking it was clinging geezers like him that kept families like us out of faculty housing. He'd probably retired already. Move out, old man, make way for the next gen-

eration. Not that the buildings were anything great: their dull, gray exteriors were brightened by balconies of red, blue, yellow, and orange, but the railings were rusting and the colors faded from decades of weather and sun. We'd heard reports there were bugs and rats, but still, they were cheaper than anything else downtown, and apparently once you were in they'd never get you out. Every year my wife had been teaching at the university there was talk of new faculty housing which always ended with, sorry, not this year, even as the university tore down and rebuilt the neighborhood, destroying their relationship with the locals who were becoming increasingly vehement, lodging petitions to block developments, even threatening guerrilla action.

Of course, no surprise, the university didn't give a shit: really it'd become, like most universities, an investment bank with an educational arm attached for tax benefits. But I'm getting ahead of myself. That's not really what I thought about that afternoon in the playground. The truth is, I wasn't really thinking at all, hence my failure to keep track of that nanny.

When I realized we were stuck inside—you needed a key to get in and out—the kids were playing on the fire-truck/jungle gym, driving through an imagined city, apparently fighting quite the conflagration, and so I didn't say anything. Someone would show up. School had just let out. But where the hell was everyone?

Shadows stretched across the playground, then swal-

lowed it in a sudden surge. I texted my wife that we'd be leaving soon and made a joke about being trapped. Lol! Except when I went to the gate to see if I could get someone's attention, the walkways were empty. That struck me as weird, with the two big buildings on either side. My kids either sensed something, or were getting hungry, or cold, or all of that, and they joined me at the gate.

"What are you doing, Daddy?" Ruby asked, leaning her head against my side.

"Just standing here," I said.

"When are we going home?" she said. Both of them looked up at me now, their tired blue eyes, my wife's eyes.

"Soon," I said. "You guys ready to leave?"

"Yeah," Simon said. "I'm tired."

"OK, buddy." I touched the gate's handle, and Ruby perked up.

"Are we locked inside?" she said.

"Of course not. Look." I pointed at a little button: EMERGENCY UNLOCK—ALARM WILL SOUND. "We can always use that."

"Is this an emergency?" Ruby asked, her pretty face crumpling with concern. Her light brown hair was matted to her temples with sweat, and Simon looked wiped out, his little blue glasses, which were held on by a strap, lopsided and smudged

"Not yet. Why don't you guys get your snacks? You must be hungry."

While they tore open bags of gummy bunnies I tried to will a passerby onto the walkways. I thought I saw someone exit the building, a dark, flitting shape, but I couldn't be sure. Then I went over to the wall facing the street, though to see over it I had to stand on a bench. This street was typically teeming with students and business people, but now it was empty. Down at the corner two industrial dump trucks had been parked to block

the road. But even if they'd closed the road, surely they hadn't closed the sidewalk? I could hear traffic over on Broadway, horns, music, an ambulance, some screaming lunatic, more horns. Then a man stepped into my line of sight. He must've been leaning on the wall beneath me: a short, heavy man in one of those bright neon work vests worn at construction sites, head obscured by a hard hat.

"Hey!" I shouted, but he didn't look up.

"Excuse me, sir!" He moved away, slouching, loping, baggy jeans bunching atop his work boots. "Sir!"

Maybe he had headphones on. Maybe he was just a shithead. Either way, he didn't turn around and soon vanished behind one of the dump trucks. I thought about yelling—there were probably more people over that way—but I didn't want to scare the kids. If I could go back, that's something I'd do differently. Along with not dozing off. And not leaving when that nanny did. So three things.

The slice of visible sky now had the thin white hue of evening, and it'd gotten noticeably colder.

"What are you doing Daddy?" Ruby asked, tugging the cuff of my jeans.

"You know what, we're going to have to use that button," I said, hopping down.

Ruby, a resolute rule follower, beloved by her teachers, did not approve and she fretted while I repacked and shouldered our bags.

I broke the glass around the button with the corner of my cell phone just as my wife texted: *ETA?*

The glass split neatly into four pieces and dropped to the ground. I pushed the button and grabbed the handle, ready to make a break once the alarm sounded, but when I pulled the door didn't move. I pressed the button harder, nothing. I pressed it again, let it go, pulled. Nothing. I shook the door, but it was a tight magnetic seal.

“Daddy?” Ruby asked. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m doing nothing.”

The bars atop the fence were topped with spikes. Sharp. A few of them rusted. The spikes atop the wall that faced the street were shorter, and maybe I could’ve climbed over, but I couldn’t leave the kids. I took a look anyway—“Are we going to climb over?” Ruby asked—and realized the wall was actually higher, more like fifteen feet.

*Big problem here*, I texted my wife, and explained the situation. The message sat there, *Delivered* but not *Read* for a few minutes and I got unreasonably angry. I may have used words I shouldn’t have in front of the kids. About their mother. As if it was her fault. When it was obviously mine.

My wife wrote back, incredulous. We were stuck? Was I kidding? No, it wasn’t a joke, I explained. Could she call someone? Who? she wrote and I had to grind my teeth to hold back more obscenities. The university? Security? The cops? Why couldn’t I call? Because the kids are sitting here! She said to hold on, she’d be there soon. That didn’t strike me as the obvious answer—was she going to bring a hacksaw to cut us free?—but when I wrote back and said she should just call someone I got no response. I tried to search for the number of the university’s security office, but for some reason my connection weakened, and the phone got hot in my hand, and the *Low Battery 20%* warning popped up, and so I put it away, trying to conserve power.

I did my best, which isn’t saying much, to distract the kids. They were exhausted and Ruby’s anxiety soon spread to Simon. But we could only wait.

Eventually, I got a text from my wife. She couldn’t get to us. The area had been closed off. I should just wait. She’d figure this out soon.

Then my phone died. The light failed, dark came. The city seemed to grow louder, pushing against the courtyard’s bubble of quiet. Simon whispered that he was thirsty and though he’d emptied his water bottle, there was a fountain in the park. Normally I forbade drinking from those germ pools, but now I let them stand there as long as they wanted, until water ran down their shirts and I worried they’d get cold. Then, of course, they had to pee. Unlike most city playgrounds, there was no bathroom in this one, probably because the people who used it lived nearby, so I took them into a sandy patch in the corner. Simon enjoyed the way his stream darkened the sand and looped up the stone wall, but Ruby whined she couldn’t pee outside, Daddy, why, she wanted to go home. I tried not to lose my temper, but I won’t claim I managed fully, and eventually, weeping, she squatted and peed. I made her take off her pants, which made it all that much more unpleasant for her, having learned my lesson in the park one Fourth of July when she’d soaked herself. And then they were tired. I was tired. We were all freaked out, and the adrenaline and anxiety made us exhausted, as if we might just wake up in a few hours and all of this would be over.

Inside Simon’s bag I found his naptime blanket and wrapped it around the two of them and had them sit on my lap, since the metal benches were getting cold. I told them a story about two little fairies who lived in a magic wood and got stuck inside a wicked tree. Halfway through it seemed like a bad choice, but they insisted I keep going. So I spun it out as they nuzzled my neck and fell asleep, first my daughter, eventually Simon. I stared at the fence, waiting for someone to walk by. No one did, though someone came out onto one of the apartment balconies. It might’ve been the old man I’d seen earlier and I wanted to shout to him, but for some reason

I didn't. The sleeping kids. Or maybe the fact I could only see a fringe of white hair, a floating ghost head.

Eventually, my arms alternately numb and burning, I woke the kids and hurried us over to the little "house" area beneath one of the play structures and settled them down under the blanket and my jacket—thankfully still my down coat, though the day had been too warm for it—then I curled up between them and held them close. It would be fair to say I was panicked. My heart pounded, hard and erratic. But at some point, to the steady bleat of traffic, in the city-softened dark, I slept, though I jerked awake once to the sound of my name, called from far away, but as I sat up a siren swelled down Broadway, and by the time it passed the voice was gone.

I must've fallen into a real sleep at some point, because in the morning the playground had been surrounded by huge green plywood boards, a little higher than the fence, the kind one saw around construction sites all over the city. I slipped out from between the stirring kids and ran to the fence. I could reach the plywood through the bars and I shoved, but it didn't move. Somehow I'd slept through all the inevitable noise of their installation, the presence of workers. If we hadn't been sleeping inside the structure they'd have seen us. This was a serious fuck up. More serious than any other to that point and panic made me whimper, moan, a smear of tears start in my eyes.

"Daddy?" Simon said, stumbling out, bleary from sleep and without his glasses. "I have to go pee pee, Daddy."

As I held Simon's little penis and instructed him to lean forward, push out his hips, come on, more buddy, I tried to tell myself the walls were actually a good thing: there'd be people around soon, I'd call to them, they'd let us out.

By the time we got back Ruby was up and already crying.

"I miss Mommy," she whined, looking up at me, her lips peeled back with weeping, her mouth a mix of baby teeth and those too-large new ones.

"Oh sweetie," I said, sitting beside her. Simon, a real cuddler, immediately climbed into my lap. After soothing them for a while I dug around in my bag and found the granola bar I'd been carrying around for about six months, and I gave each of them half. I crunched a few Altoids for breakfast. We drank water at the fountain, Ruby peed, needing again to disrobe and even more reluctant this time, in the daylight. They didn't say anything about the construction barriers. As if they didn't notice them. Or knew I had no answers.

But like most kids they're resilient and soon they were running around and playing, climbing up the slides, sliding down poles. While they did I walked the perimeter, looking for a way out. Who'd designed this fucking place? Iron bars? Wouldn't a chain link fence be sufficient? I listened carefully as I went, but heard only the rumble of trucks, a distant, steady jackhammer. While the kids were over by the swings, I tried screaming, "Hey!"

During this patrol I found it: a white plastic bag, with a brown paper bag inside. It'd fallen behind a tree near the fence, and so at first I thought it might've been there all along, but inside were a dozen bagels, a container of cream cheese, and a note from my wife, written hurriedly on a sloppily torn piece of university letterhead.

N—

I'm putting this note in with the bagels and will try to get it to you. They keep telling me I can't get any closer and that there's no one in the playground. But I'll find a way to get you out. I'm talk-

ing to the police, but they keep telling me to call the university, so I'm going to talk to them today. There are more and more protests out here, which isn't helping. I hope the kids are OK. I love you. Take care of them. Tell them I love them.

A

She must've slipped past the barricades and tossed this over in the night. So I *had* heard my name, she'd been calling to me, probably as they'd dragged her away. The note explained the green walls: didn't they put those up to keep down dust and noise? And if they were to demolish the playground, they'd have to come inside. Unless they'd mined it already. I went around looking for wires or explosives but found none.

I showed the kids the bagels and though Ruby had spent her entire life claiming she hated them I said she'd have to deal. After breakfast, they had to poop. In the sandbox I found an orange kid's shovel and used it to dig a hole over where we'd been peeing and both kids used it. When they were done I realized I was in the same boat, as it were. By the time we were finished I'd used up all my tissue travel packs. I cleaned us up with hand sanitizer and we went back to our little nest under the structure to read. I'd brought *Tintin in Tibet*, which both kids liked, and that took up the rest of the morning.

As I pushed the kids on the swings—they'd taken off their fleeces in the warm afternoon—a truck roared down the street, just on the other side of the green wall. I screamed, "Hey, hey, stop!" startling the kids, but grinding gears swallowed my puny voice.

When evening came I slipped into a state of resignation. I no longer expected to get out any time soon. Ridiculous, because obviously there were people all around, workmen, people in the apartments. Unless the apart-

ments were being demolished too. Night seemed to affirm this: only two lights were on inside the building behind us, one on the fifth floor, the old man's apartment, though I saw no sign of him. We ate some bagels for dinner and tried to sleep, but the bagels had hardened, the ground was cold, and the children squirmed and moaned and cried until they were finally exhausted enough to sleep. I stayed awake most of the night, hoping to hear my wife's voice, trying to think of something that might count as a plan. It's fair to say I failed.

Explosions woke us. First, a loud crack, like something falling off the back of a truck, then another, and another. I jerked up and hit my head on the structure. As another series of detonations went off I scrambled out and only found the source when the building started falling. It was a faculty building, at the far end of the avenue, so I could only see the top floors over the construction barriers. The building curled in, like a piece of paper in a slow closing fist, then slipped away. The children huddled together, crying, but in the noise of the collapse I couldn't hear them. Into the space where the building had been a white cloud rose, writhing layers, pushing toward us. I ran to the kids and covered us with the blanket. Almost holding my breath I waited for the deluge, but only a fine rain of grit tinkled down, settling on our blanket like pollen.

Machines clanked and groaned throughout the day and an occasional dust cloud swelled up. I tried to calm the kids down. They were no longer crying, but their eyes were slightly too large, their heads jerking around, like quick, wary animals.

We ate the last of the bagels and I tried not to think about what would happen when we were next hungry, and then we went to the fountain and took turns washing our faces and necks, standing in a square of sun to

keep warm, shaking and rubbing ourselves dry. Then I suggested a game of hide and seek. At one point I couldn't find Simon and I had to tell myself not to panic, because where could he have gone? Silver lining and so on. Then we read *Tintin in Tibet* again, but none of us could really focus. The situation now seemed very, very bad. I kept checking my phone, as if it might've found some scrap of battery somewhere and turned itself on, but it only cast back my ghostly reflection: my scruff had grown in, and my hair stood up, a matted mess. Not that it mattered.

Here's something that mattered: we were out of food. The kids complained about being hungry and I kept saying, later, come on, be patient, and then I gave them gum, first lecturing Simon about not swallowing it. That distracted them for a good hour, during which time I sat on a bench in the sun, my legs sprawled out. Before that I hadn't really given into despair, but I figured I was due. While I despaired, my two hungry kids wandered in desultory loops, reminding me of Dante's account in the *Inferno* of Count Ugolino, which by chance I'd assigned to my classes for that week, which if I didn't get out of there soon would be a problem, though not as much of a problem as starving to death.

A flock of pigeons descended around me and began their maddening pecking and lurching. Having lived in the city for a decade I usually barely noticed them, but now they seemed to be taunting me. Look at those fat gluttonous fuckers! Maybe I could catch one and train it to bring us food. Or carry messages to the outside world. One in particular got closer and closer and I stayed still until it was over my foot, then I lashed out with a kick. The tip of my shoe caught the bird's head and it fell over. The rest scattered, a snapping clatter of wings. I checked on the kids—they were draped on their stomachs over

the swings, swaying—then I squatted beside the bird. It wasn't dead: the rib cage rose, shuddered, fell. And what I did must've been instinct, because I don't remember deciding to grab it and snap its neck.

We could eat this pigeon. People did that, right? Raised them to be eaten, and sure this was a wild vermin, possibly infected with bird flu, but it was meat. Protein. Calories.

Stuffing the dead bird in my pocket, its neck lolling obscenely against one wing, I got our bags. In one of the interior pockets of Simon's I found a magnifying glass. I'd given him this last year in Vermont, despite my wife's concerns about the glass breaking. He must've hidden it away before we could change our minds and forgotten about it. In my own bag I found some tools. Well, specifically: pens and a glasses screwdriver. But now they were tools. For preparing dinner.

Probably I was acting strange, or excited, because the kids followed me over to the patch of dirt beneath the playground's one large tree, where I began to gather branches for a fire. They helped and once we'd made a small pyramid with a crumpled piece of paper in the middle—my bag had a number of student papers, perfect kindling—they wanted to light it, but I said we had to wait. Then I pulled out the pigeon; the claws on its dinosaur feet scraped my palm. They looked at it, surprised, but not horrified. And these were kids who cried if you killed a cockroach or a spider. But, as if they'd already adapted to our new reality, they leaned on my shoulders and watched as I clumsily plucked feathers. When I had trouble with the down under the bird's chest, Ruby reached in with her small, strong fingers and pinched it free. Nude, the bird wasn't at all appealing, and now I had to gut it. I knew you couldn't cook it with its stomach and intestines, and I thought about sending the kids away,

but I didn't. Probably a Bad Dad moment. They watched as I stabbed open the pigeon's belly with my pen, then sliced with the sharp edge of the screwdriver and opened it up. Blood leaked out, though less than I'd expected, and then I reached in for the guts. Sickening work. After I'd extracted what I thought were all the organs, I took the sharpest stick I could find and shoved it through the carcass to make a spit.

I asked Ruby to hold the bird, which she did with ceremonial solemnity, while I tilted the magnifying glass this way, that, until it concentrated a beam of light. I guided this to the paper, which caught with surprising speed. I kept the beam steady until the paper smoldered, then I dropped it—Simon snatched it up, proud of his toy's magical properties—and I tended the pyramid, adding sticks until we had a proper fire. Then I held the bird over the flames. My arm soon ached and it took forever to cook, and I ended up scorching most of it.

I'm not going to lie and say the bird was delicious, but we ate it, our faces smeared with grease, dark streaks somehow getting on Simon's forehead. We downed two bottles of water each. We were lucky they hadn't shut it off, given the demolitions.

Our adventure with the bird wore us out and we slept easier that night. The next morning I found the second package from my wife. As soon as I climbed out of our room I saw it: a brown grocery bag, split open where it'd landed. Inside we found oranges, bananas, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, crackers, Capri-sun packets, a roll of salami, powdered milk, a bottle of vitamins, toothbrushes, a roll of toilet paper (just in time, or maybe a little late), and at the bottom, taped up in bubble wrap to keep it safe during the toss over the fence, a cell phone. While the kids gobbled sandwiches—even the crusts—and slurped powdered milk, I turned on the

phone. *Searching, Searching.* Then: *No Network.* Then, as if it had changed its mind, a single feeble bar came up. I called my wife.

"Honey?" she said. "Is it you?"

"It's me," I said.

"Hello? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here, you need to get someone to open this place up, now."

"Honey?"

"I'm here, I said, you need—"

"Honey? I can't hear you. I don't think you have a good connection."

Instead of wasting battery like that I called 911, but the same thing happened: they answered but couldn't hear me. Then I sent a text to 911: TRAPPED IN THE KEY PARK ON MERCER. SEND HELP. CHILDREN TRAPPED TOO. It seemed to go through. *Delivered* appeared beneath, but no reply ever came. Could you even text 911? The next went to my wife, saying basically the same thing.

A wavering gray ellipses appeared and I waited for her message, but it took forever. What was she writing? A fucking essay? And it turned out to be not far off—maybe she was afraid multiple texts would get lost in transit. She explained the situation: the university had been trying to tear down these buildings and the playground for years and had just gotten permission through sketchy back channels from a judge and so they'd immediately evicted all the residents and sealed everything off. There were rumors of pets stuck inside units, but no one was allowed back in. They intended to tear it all down before someone could stop them. When she'd tried to explain they were trapped inside the playground they assumed she was a protester who might shackle herself to the fence or something. The construction company

kept directing her to the university, but when she'd gone to the Public Safety Office they'd asked for her ID and once they found out she wasn't tenured or famous they lost all interest and claimed they couldn't do anything. She hoped the kids were OK. She loved us. She'd bribed one of the workers to toss this bag over the fence. She'd try to do that every day, because she couldn't get past the barricades. There were armed guards. Not police, some kind of security contractors. Protesters were always there, and that definitely didn't help. One of the workers told her there'd be a final inspection, so at the latest they'd be found then. Oh, God, she loved us so much. Kiss her babies.

But when would that inspection be? Tomorrow? Next week? A few months from now? What if the protesters found some way to cause a delay? That'd get us stuck here indefinitely. But maybe security would lapse and she'd find a way through. I didn't know what to hope for.

When I tried to reply the message got stuck on *Sending*, then eventually failed. A little later the ellipses came up on the screen, but nothing ever came through. I turned the phone off for a few hours, thinking maybe a rest and reboot would help.

I worried contact with the outside world might make the kids anxious. They spent the day playing and wrestling, energized by the sandwiches. I guess I perked up too, because I decided we should try to climb the big tree in the middle of the playground. I lifted Ruby over my head and she got a hold of the first branch, but couldn't pull herself up. I jumped, and to my horror couldn't lift myself either. I'd gotten soft with age, and I spent the afternoon doing push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks. The kids joined me, in their way, frequently stopping to rest. Then we did some sprints, but that led to a screaming fit from Simon after his sister kept beating him. I

comforted him, though not quite as much as I might've normally. I knelt in front of him and said, "If you want to beat her, then get faster. Try harder. Otherwise she's always going to win."

He didn't take this well, but this was no time or place for pampering.

The second building fell the next morning, farther away this time, and though we heard the explosions and the collapse we never saw it, and no dust reached us. Maybe because the wind blew steadily to the west.

We ate the last of the food, passing the salami back and forth, tearing off chunks with our teeth. No package came over the fence. All the next day passed without food and in our hunger we went silent, as if waiting for something, and in the evening, as it got dark, three rats raced into the playground, squeezing under the walls. Probably they'd been displaced by the construction work. They had that look: frantic, lost.

Once they were inside we had them. We'd gathered quite an arsenal of sharpened sticks and I'd hardened some of the tips in the fire, and the kids and I each grabbed one, then chased the rats around, stabbing and trying to trap them. Two got away, I have no idea how, but we managed to squeeze one into a corner where it hissed and bore its long teeth, tearing at the concrete with its claws, but I lunged forward and skewered it through a shoulder. The rat let out a wild shriek, thrashed as it bled, and eventually died, tongue bitten through so a red froth bloomed around its mouth. Then we made a fire and skinned it and ate it. I thought we could make a broth from its bones, but we didn't have a pot. But maybe I could make one out of the head of that metal elephant? Though knocking it free would take some serious work.

Around then I lost track of time. Not in some dramatic

fashion, but I can't say for sure if the third package came over the fence two or three days later. Inside I found a frantic letter from my wife. Why hadn't I called? In fact I'd tried calling, and texting, but the phone never had a signal. If I could write a letter and throw it over the fence she'd try to get one of the workers to pick it up. The protests were worse than ever. A dozen people had been arrested yesterday and she'd almost gotten swept up in it. She heard someone in a black ski mask say they should take it to the next level, which didn't sound good.

I tried to write a letter, but what could I tell her? About the pigeon? The rat? Our attempts at eating acorns? The skills we'd gained in sharpening sticks and skinning our dinner? How filthy the children were, all of us wearing the same clothes day after day and sleeping outside? So I put it off. In fact, I never wrote back.

The letter did have an impact, though: it spurred me to try the tree again. I felt stronger, or maybe just got a surge of adrenaline, but, with a lot of grunting and pain, I dragged myself over the first branch. The kids cheered from below. I got high enough to see over the construction barriers. I could see the rubble of the two fallen buildings. A big backhoe, its claw extended, had been parked in front of another, closer building.

"Hey motherfuckers!" I screamed. "You fucking assholes! Over here, you dickless shitheads!"

I thought they'd pay more attention to such language, get angry, decide to notice. But there was no one around, no response. The windows of the building behind the playground were sloppily blinded, some pulled all the way down, others half way, a few crooked, as if the cord had been hastily jerked. Down the street were those two dump trucks still blocking the road, but I couldn't see anyone, no protesters like my wife had mentioned. There were only the bleating cabs and trucks on Broadway, the

hiss of wind through the branches, which, in a sudden gust, swayed and made me cling tight. At the base of the tree, my kids stared up, Ruby shielding her eyes, Simon squinting, blinded by the sky.

The explosions came, loud and close, and by the time I looked up the building behind us crumpled in that slow, gentle way the other had, but terribly loud this time, the roaring of the mortar and stone and wrenching metal.

I scrambled down the branches wanting to tell the kids to run, but I slipped, smacking my shoulder on the trunk, but I wrapped my legs around the bark and kept sliding down. Dust pushed through the green walls like a wave, and seeing that, I panicked, lost my footing, and fell from the second to last branch. I landed awkwardly, rolling onto my side over my ankle so pain flared up my leg. I grabbed Ruby and Simon, lost my balance, fell. The cloud surrounded us, blotting out everything, forcing its way, burning, up our noses, into our mouths, watering our eyes, sticking to the lenses of Simon's glasses. I pulled the kids' shirts over their mouths and hobbled to our room and covered us with the blanket. From the darkness beneath the blanket, it sounded like the end of the world.

Like all things, even the end of the world ends at some point.

"Daddy, it's done," Ruby said, poking my arm.

"Just stay still, honey," I said. Mostly because pain surged in my leg and I doubted I could stand.

But the kids ignored me and ran off to explore. I lifted my head: the ground and structures and swings were coated with a thick, chunky ash. I touched my ankle and my whole body recoiled. My sock cut into my swollen skin. At some point I fell asleep. Maybe I only slept for an hour or two, or maybe an entire day. I have no way of saying. But the next time I saw the kids their faces had

been washed clean—surely Ruby’s doing—though the rest of them was still white, and with the water they’d pushed Simon’s hair into spikes, and Ruby had clumped hers into two hard ponytails.

“There’s a package, Daddy. From Mommy.” She held up an envelope, a padded one, still sealed. I told her to open it. When I sat up, nausea and dizziness almost made me vomit.

Inside they found candy bars, which they tore open and devoured, forgetting to leave me any. Or maybe not forgetting. Squatting, their hair and bodies white, their faces smeared with chocolate, they looked like wild creatures from some ancient world. I looked in the package, but found no letter. No name on the outside.

I must’ve fallen asleep again because when I woke the kids were gone and they didn’t answer my calls. I heard distant shouting, an amplified voice, a bang, a succession of pops. At some point came the roar of another building falling and another fine rain of grit.

I lay in the haze, clutching the serviceless cell phone, wanting to cry, but not letting myself and so I didn’t notice the children standing nearby, holding sharpened sticks, which I guess at this point should be called spears. They watched me impassively, then seemed to notice my eyes were open.

“The fence is gone,” Simon said, pointing with his spear. “It fell down.”

“What?” I said, sitting up. The pain had lessened somewhat, though my ankle felt stiff and tight.

“It’s true,” Ruby said. “Part of the fence is gone. We can get out.”

“Where?”

“Over there,” she pointed the same way her brother had. “We already looked. There’s no one there.”

“You went out? Without me?”

They both looked at me, unimpressed.

“Help me up,” I said, holding out a hand.

They hesitated, looked at each other, as if debating whether or not to abandon me, but eventually they pulled me up. I limped to our stick pile, where I found one that could serve as a crutch. With this I could hobble along. The children led the way, whispering, glancing back at me.

They were right: a portion of a falling building had smashed the fence and construction barrier. To get out we’d have to climb over rubble, strewn with glass and split rebar. The kids clambered up the pile like a couple of goats.

“Come on, Dad,” Ruby said. “Hurry up.”

I did my best to keep up, a sharp stabbing in my leg as I dragged myself over the stones to the street. Not only had the faculty housing been demolished, but several other nearby buildings had fallen, and down the block a whole row of apartments smoldered, black beards of smoke around the windows. Sirens moaned far off, and inside a nearby building a woman screamed steadily, so plaintive I could only imagine her kneeling over the dead body of her child.

The kids moved slowly, spears pointed out, as if something might come out of the dusty haze. The dump trucks were gone, only an overturned motorcycle in the middle of the intersection. Without a word, I followed my children, making our way cautiously into the new city. 