Dedication

For Lisel.

The whole of this library — every book, every series, and the Jakobus Thread that runs through the heart of it — is hers. Each page that follows may carry another name; all of them together carry only one. She is the floor the entire house stands on.

Sawubona.

For the loneliest person in the world — whoever you are, wherever you are.

Someone saw you once. All the way down. It was real. Whatever else you were made to believe — it was real.

And he has hoped, every quiet day since, that it reached you too.

Chapter 1 — Weather

The boy could tell what kind of evening it would be from the sound of the front door.

There was a way it closed that meant nothing — a careless swing, the latch catching on the first try, and he could stay where he was at the kitchen table with his book and his problems and not look up. And there was the other way, the soft way, the door eased shut with a care that had nothing to do with care, the latch set down like a thing that must not wake, and when he heard that one the boy was already moving, already gathering his book and his pencils, already a small grey shape going up the stairs without weight, because the soft door meant the weather had come home, and the only safe place in weather was out of the room.

He was eleven, and then he was twelve, and then he was older, and the whole time he was learning the one thing he would ever be truly good at, which was the reading of a sky before it broke.

It was not a thing he decided to learn. Nobody teaches a child to forecast his own house. He learned it the way a plant learns the sun, by leaning, day after day, toward the thing that let him live, and the thing that let him live was knowing — a half-second before anyone else, a full minute if he was lucky — which way the air in a room was going to move. The set of his father's shoulders coming through a door. The particular silence at the dinner table that was only quiet and the other particular silence that was a held breath before a storm. His mother's hands going still over the washing-up, not because she had heard anything he could hear, but because she had felt the pressure drop, exactly as he had, and the two

of them would not look at each other, two barometers in one small house, both reading the same falling glass and saying nothing.

He thought everyone could do it. That was the thing he understood much later, and never quite got over: for years he assumed that every person alive walked into a room and felt, instantly, the whole emotional weather of it — who was angry and hiding it, who was frightened, who was about to cry, who was lying and pleased with the lie. He assumed it the way you assume everyone sees the colour blue. It did not occur to him that it was rare, because to him it was not a skill, it was just the air, it was just what a room *was*, a thing as obvious and unremarkable as temperature. He could no more not-feel it than he could not-hear.

And it made him, in every way that a boy is measured, useless.

He was clumsy. His body did not belong to him — it arrived late to every instruction his brain gave it, so that he dropped things, and tripped on flat ground, and could not catch a ball to save his life, and wrote in a hand that shamed him, the letters never landing where he sent them. On the field he was last. In the queue he was the one who stood slightly wrong. He had no quickness in him that anyone could see, no swagger, nothing a boy could trade for a place in the pack — and boys, he learned early, are a pack, and a pack reads weakness the way he read weather, instantly and without mercy, and a soft clumsy clever boy who flinched at raised voices was weakness with a bell on it.

So he was alone. Not bullied, much — he was too good at reading the room for that, he could feel the cruelty gathering and be elsewhere before it broke, the same skill that kept him out of his father's storms kept him out of the worst of theirs. But alone. On the edge of every group, in the gap at every table, the boy who was *there* and not *with*, and who had decided, somewhere around the age of thirteen, with the terrible flat certainty of a clever child, that this was simply what he was: a person built slightly wrong for the world, who would spend his life on the outside of the glass looking in at the warm rooms where the others knew, without ever being told, how to belong.

He was sure he was the only one. That was the loneliness under the loneliness. Not that he was alone — lots of children are alone — but that he was alone in a way that no one else was, that everyone else had been handed a map he hadn't, some simple set of instructions for how to be a person among people, and that the map had skipped him, and that he would never, ever catch up, because you cannot learn in your head a thing that everyone else got in the body, before memory, for free.

What he had instead of the map was the weather-sense, and the weather-sense was not, he believed, a gift. It was a smoke alarm. It was the thing a creature grows when it lives somewhere dangerous — a too-fine sensitivity, an always-on dread, the nervous system of a small animal in a house of large weather. He did not value it. You do not value the ache in a joint that tells you rain is coming. It was just the cost of where he lived, the price of the falling glass, and he assumed

he would carry it, useless and exhausting, for the rest of his life, in the way you carry a limp.

He was wrong about that, the way he was wrong about most things concerning himself. But it would be years before anyone showed him what the thing in him actually was — before, at last, a grown man looked at him across a desk and named it, warmly, like a wonderful secret: *you see people, don't you, you really see them.* And the boy, starved his whole life of being seen, would have no defence against it at all.

And the men who said it would not be gentle, though they would seem so.

But that was later. That was the summer he was sixteen, and everything after.

For now he was just a boy at a kitchen table, listening to the front door, learning the one thing he was good at and believing it was nothing, alone in a world he could not work, certain — wrongly, achingly, for years to come — that in all of it, in the whole wide turning world, he was the only one.

Chapter 2 — The Institute

The summer he was fifteen they sent him away, and for the first time in his life he was glad to go.

It was a programme run by the state for clever children — the ones who tested high, who could be pulled out of the ordinary stream and gathered, three weeks each summer, at an old institute on the edge of the capital, a place of long cool corridors and high windows and the particular hush of a building built for thinking. They came from all over the country, the clever children, in buses, with single suitcases, and the boy got down off his bus expecting nothing, because he had learned to expect nothing, and walked into the only happiness he had ever known.

Because here, the things that had made him useless did not count.

Here nobody threw a ball. Here the day was not a field where his late, traitor body shamed him. Here the day was *problems* — long beautiful problems on a board, set by quiet adults who did not raise their voices, problems in mathematics and logic and the strange new things they called philosophy and political science, and the boy who could not catch and could not run discovered that he could *think*, that his mind, which was the only part of him that had ever arrived on time, was not just adequate but quick, quicker than almost anyone's in the room. They gave them programming, on machines the boy's school had never seen — and the logic of it went into him like water into dry ground, clean and total, a language his late clumsy body finally could not foul, because the keys did not care how he moved, only what he meant. They taught critical thinking, which turned out to mean the thing he had been doing alone in his head his whole life, only now it had a name and there were others doing it too. They taught

them to argue, to take a thing apart and see what held it up, and the boy who had never once won at anything physical found that he could, gently and without quite meaning to, win at this.

And the reward for being good at it — this was the strange genius of the place, and he only understood the shape of it much later — the reward was to be excused from everything he hated. The institute had its dull duties, its drills and its assemblies and its physical training, its hours of the things that were good for clever children's characters, and the children who shone in the room were quietly, increasingly, let off them. You did not have to stand in the rows and sing if you were wanted in the seminar. You did not have to suffer the field if the logic class had claimed you. Being brilliant bought you out of being ordinary, and the boy, who had paid the full ordinary price his whole life with a body that betrayed him, spent that brilliance with both hands, and was free.

But it was not the problems that undid him. It was the other children.

Because they were like him. Not all of them, not in every way — but for the first time in his fifteen years the boy was in a room full of people who were also slightly wrong for the world, who had also stood at the edge of every group at home, who also flinched or stammered or could not catch or had spent their childhoods on the outside of the glass. The strange ones. The too-clever ones. The ones whose minds had outrun their lives. And in the evenings, in the long light, in the cool corridors and the unmowed garden behind the institute, they found each other, the way water finds its level, and the boy who had been certain — *certain*, with the flat hopeless certainty of a clever lonely child — that he was the only one, sat on a stone step in the dusk with three other strange clever children arguing about whether a person could ever truly know another person's mind, and felt something he had no word for, because he had never felt it before.

He was not the only one.

That was all it was. Four odd children on a step in the half-dark, and one of them said a clever thing and another laughed and the boy laughed too, with them, *in* it, not on the edge of it for once but inside the warm circle of it, and he had to look up at the darkening sky for a moment because his eyes had stung and he did not want them to see. He had thought it was just him. For fifteen years he had carried the loneliness under the loneliness, the certainty of being singular and unmeetable, and here on a stone step it turned out to be a lie, the kindest lie his life had ever told him, and he would have done anything — he understood this later, with a cold drop in his stomach — he would have done *anything* to never go back to being the only one.

That was the door they came through. Not cruelty. Belonging. The thing he wanted most in the world and had given up on, offered to him at fifteen on a stone step, and then offered again, and again, summer after summer, three weeks a year, the only place he had ever been a person among people — until the wanting of it was so deep and so old that a man behind a desk would only

have to threaten, very gently, to take it away, and the boy would do what he was told.

They watched the clever children. Of course they did; that was partly what the institute was *for*, though the boy did not know it yet. Quiet adults moved among them in the seminars and the gardens, watching which mind went where, which child could take a thing apart, which child could lead the others without seeming to, which child the others turned to. And somewhere in those summers a particular quiet adult began to watch the boy — not for his quickness with a proof, though that was noted, but for the other thing, the thing the boy still thought was nothing: the way he always knew, before anyone said it, when a discussion was about to turn, when one child had wounded another without meaning to, when the room needed something and what it needed. The way he read the weather.

The boy did not notice the watching. He was too happy. He had found, at last, the warm room, and he had walked all the way inside it, and he never thought — why would he, at fifteen, starved and grateful — to wonder why the door had been left so conveniently open, or who was standing just inside it, smiling, waiting for him to come close enough to be useful.

Chapter 3 — The Man Who Saw Him See

The summer he was sixteen, a man asked to speak with him alone, and called him by the name of the thing he was.

The man had a small office off one of the long corridors, a quiet room with a window onto the garden, and he was not like the seminar adults, the boy felt that the instant he came through the door — felt it in the weather, the way he felt everything, a stillness in the man that was different from the stillness of the thinkers, a held quality, watchful, the stillness of someone who is always, gently, measuring. The man was warm. That was the first thing and it mattered enormously, because warmth was the one currency the boy had never been able to resist. The man rose and shook his hand and said his name as though it were a name worth knowing, and asked him to sit, and offered him tea, and for a while they only talked — about the proofs, about the philosophy seminar, about a clever thing the boy had said three days before that the boy had not known anyone important had heard.

And then the man set down his cup, and looked at the boy with a small private smile, like a person about to share a wonderful secret, and said:

"You see people. Don't you. You really see them."

And the boy's heart opened like a door eased soft on its latch.

He had never been told. In sixteen years not one person had ever named the thing in him, because the thing in him was invisible, it left no mark, it caught no ball and won no race and hung on no wall — and here was a warm still man in a

quiet room saying it back to him as though it were not a smoke alarm, not the ache before rain, not the exhausting nervous cost of a dangerous house, but a *gift*. A rare and valuable gift. The boy felt the heat come up his neck and was glad of the tea to look at, because no one had ever, and the wanting to be seen that he had carried his whole starved life rose up in him at that one sentence and he was, in that moment, entirely the man's, and did not know it, and would not have cared if he had.

"Most people," the man went on, gently, conversationally, "walk through the world half-blind. They see the surfaces. They believe what a face tells them. They have no idea — none — what's actually happening in a room. The feelings under the feelings. The truth under the words." He turned his cup a quarter-turn on its saucer. "But some people, a very few, see it all. They walk into a room and they read it like a page. They know who's lying, and who's afraid, and who's about to break, and what the person in front of them most wants to hear. It's not taught. You can't teach it. You're born with it or you're not, and almost no one is." He looked at the boy, warm, certain. "You are. I've watched you for two summers. You're the most natural reader of people I have ever seen in someone your age. You probably think it's nothing. You probably think everyone does it." A small smile. "They don't. It's the rarest thing there is. And it would be a tragedy to waste it."

The boy did not know what to say, so he said nothing, which the man seemed to like.

They began to meet, that summer, in the quiet office off the corridor. The man gave him things to read — about people, about persuasion, about how a country was really run underneath the part you could see, about the gap between what is said and what is meant, which was the gap the boy had lived in his whole life and never had words for. And the man listened to him, really listened, the rarest flattery there is, and named his perceptions back to him as insights, and made the boy feel — for the first time, ever — not slightly wrong for the world but *specially made* for it, fitted for a thing most people couldn't even see. After a life spent on the edge of every warm room, it was like being let inside one at last, into a warmth so deep the boy would have walked through fire to stay in it — and the man knew that, the boy understood much later, had known it from the first cup of tea, because reading the hungry is the easiest reading there is, and the man was a far better reader than the boy would ever be.

And then, near the end of that summer, the gift inside the gift.

There was a programme, the man said. An exchange. A rare thing, an honour, only for the very few — a place at a summer institute abroad, in another country, among the children of important people, a chance the boy could not have dreamed of, the kind of door that opens once. The man said it lightly, as though it were the most natural next step in the world for a boy of such promise, and the boy's whole chest filled with it, because it was everything — it was belonging and specialness and a future, all at once, handed to the clumsy lonely boy who

had never been chosen for anything.

“There’ll be a girl there,” the man said.

He said it the same way he said everything, warm and easy, turning his cup. And the boy, sixteen and dazzled, did not feel the weather change — or rather he did, he felt it, a small drop in the glass, a cooling, the faintest wrongness moving under the warm words like a cold current under a sunlit sea, but he did not understand it, and he did not want to understand it, and so he let it pass.

“The daughter of an important man,” the man went on. “A powerful man. A man we’d very much like to understand better. The girl will be lonely — girls like that always are, you’ll see, it’s a sad thing — and you, with your gift, you’ll find it the easiest thing in the world to be a friend to her. To listen. To let her talk. People tell things to a person who really sees them; you know that better than anyone.” The cup turned. “And now and then, you’ll tell us what she tells you. Nothing dramatic. Just — what you hear. What you understand about her father, and his world, from the things she lets slip. You’ll be very good at it. You’re very good at hearing what people don’t quite say.”

And the boy sat in the quiet office with the cold current moving under the warm sea, and he felt, far down, in the part of him that read weather and could not be fooled even when the rest of him longed to be, that something here was not gentle. That the warm still man was not, in the end, kind. That the gift the boy had been so starved to have named was being named *for a reason*, and that the reason was the cold current, and that he, the boy, was about to be used in some way he could not see the shape of, by people who did not love him, however warm the tea.

He felt all of it. He read it true, the way he read everything.

And he said yes anyway, because the alternative was to go back to being the only one, and he would have done anything, anything at all, to never again be the only one.

That was the whole of how they got him. Not a threat. Not a wire. A lonely boy, and the first warm room he’d ever been let into, and a man clever enough to see that a child who has never been seen will follow the one who sees him straight off the edge of the world.

The boy went home at the end of that summer with the exchange arranged and a coldness in his stomach he did not examine. He told no one. There was no one to tell; that was rather the point of choosing him. And in the spring they sent for him, and he packed his single suitcase, and he went abroad, to the lake and the great frightening house and the loneliest girl in the world, to do the warm man’s quiet work.

He did not yet know that the gift the man had named — the seeing of people, the reading of the weather — would do, in the end, the one thing the warm man had never accounted for.

It would let him see *her*. Truly. All the way down.

And a boy who could truly see the loneliest person in the world was the one instrument the warm man should never have built, and aimed, and sent.

Chapter 4 — The House by the Lake

The house stood above a lake, and it was the most frightening beautiful thing the boy had ever seen.

It was not frightening the way his own house had been frightening — there was no weather in it, no falling glass, no soft-closed door. It was frightening because it had too much of everything: too many rooms, too much quiet, too many people who moved through it softly and did not meet your eye, gardeners and a cook and men in plain dark clothes who stood at the edges of things and watched with that same held, measuring stillness the man at the institute had, except these men were not warm and did not pretend to be. The boy felt the weather of the place the moment the car came up the long drive, and the weather was *fear* — a low, constant, well-mannered fear, the fear of people who work for a man so powerful that no one in his house ever quite relaxes, ever quite forgets to be careful, ever quite stops listening for the door.

He had been brought here as part of the exchange, one of a small handful of foreign children placed for the summer with important families, a programme that was real and respectable and a perfect skin over the thing underneath. The other children went to other houses. He went to this one, the house above the lake, because of the girl, and he knew it, and the men in dark clothes knew it, and nobody said it, and that was the first lesson of the house: the realest things were the ones no one said.

He met her at dinner the first night, across a long table, and his gift — the seeing, the weather-reading, the thing the warm man had named — took one look at her and broke his heart before she had said a single word.

She was his age, or near it. She was poised in a way no child should be poised, sitting very straight at the great table, using the right fork without thinking, answering when spoken to in three languages, lovely and composed and entirely correct. To anyone half-blind — to the surface-readers, the man's voice said in his memory, the ones who believe a face — she would have looked like the luckiest girl alive. The daughter of a powerful man, in a beautiful house, with everything.

But the boy was not half-blind. The boy had spent sixteen years reading the truth under the surface because the truth under the surface was the only thing that had ever kept him safe, and he looked across the long table at the poised and lovely girl and he saw, instantly and completely, the loneliest person he had ever seen in his life.

It was in everything. It was in the way the servants' eyes slid off her — not with the fear they showed her father, but with something almost worse, a careful blankness, the blankness of people who have been told not to engage, not to befriend, not to be real with her. It was in the way the few approved companions of her own age, two other girls brought in for the summer, spoke to her — brightly, attentively, *correctly*, and with a tiny held wariness under every word that the boy recognised because it was the wariness of children who have been coached, who have been sat down beforehand and told *you may do this and you may not do that, you must be careful with her, do you understand, be careful*. He could see the coaching on them like a coat. They were not her friends. They were her staff, in the costume of friends, and she knew it — that was the thing that finished him — *she knew it*, he could see that she knew it, in the bright correct hollow way she played the game back at them, because she had never in her life had anything else and had stopped, long ago, expecting to.

And it was in her stillness. She had the held, careful, always-measuring stillness of the men in dark clothes, of the whole fearful house — but on her it was not the stillness of someone watching for a powerful man. It was the stillness of someone who had learned, very young, that there was no point reaching for anyone, because everyone who came near her came *managed*, came *instructed*, came already told how to handle her, and that she would never, not once, be simply *met*. She had built the same wall he had built, the boy saw, from the same brick — the certainty of being unmeetable, of being alone in a way no one else was — except where his wall had been built against weather, hers had been built against *fear*, against a world that approached her only ever sideways, carefully, because of her father, never her.

She thought she was the only one. He could see it on her the way he could see weather. She thought, this poised lovely lonely girl at the great table, that in all the wide turning world she was singular and unreachable and would always be — and the boy, who had thought the exact same thing on a kitchen chair and a stone step and the outside of every glass, looked at her across the candles and felt the recognition go through him like cold water, like a hand closing over his heart, because he knew that loneliness, he knew it from the inside, it was *his*, and here it was wearing a beautiful dress at the other end of a frightening table, looking back at him with carefully blank eyes that had already, he could tell, filed him as one more person who would approach her sideways and have to be managed.

He was supposed to befriend her. That was the task. Get close, listen, report. The warm man's quiet work.

And the boy sat at the long table in the fearful house above the lake and understood, with a clarity that frightened him more than the men in dark clothes, that he was not going to be able to do it — not the work, not the reporting, not the using of her — because you cannot spy on your own reflection, and he had just looked across a table and seen, in the loneliest girl in the world, his own face.

What he did not understand yet, what would take him the whole summer to understand, was that she had seen something too.

Because when the candles guttered and the long correct dinner ended and the girl rose to say her poised goodnights, she looked, for just a moment, at the strange foreign boy who had said almost nothing all evening — and the boy, who could not help what he did, who had never once in his life been able to look at a lonely person with anything but recognition, let her see it. Just for a second. He did not perform warmth at her the way the coached girls did. He did not approach her sideways. He just looked at her, openly, the way you look at someone you already understand, and let the recognition show in his face — *I see it, I see you, I know exactly what that wall is made of because I built one too* — and then dropped his eyes, because it was too much, because he had not meant to.

And across the guttering candles, for the first time in a very long time, the loneliest girl in the world looked at a person and could not, quite, file them.

She went to bed not understanding it. So did he. Neither of them knew that the only honest thing that would ever happen to either of them had just begun, by accident, across a table, between two children who had each been certain, their whole lives, that they were the only one.

Chapter 5 — Checkmate

She beat everyone at everything, and the boy worked out why within his first three days in the house, because it was the kind of thing his gift was built to see.

There was a games room — of course there was, the house had a room for everything — with a chessboard of inlaid stone, and cards, and the long apparatus of a wealthy idle summer, and in the afternoons the children were sent there, the girl and her two coached companions and the foreign boy, to be young together in the approved way. And the girl won. She won the chess, every game, against both girls, easily, and she won the cards, and she won the silly garden games, and she won with a flat practised grace that had no joy in it at all, and the two companions lost to her brightly, smilingly, *correctly*, and the boy watched two afternoons of it before he understood that he was not watching a girl who was good at games.

He was watching a girl no one had ever dared to beat.

It was in the companions' hands. He could see it — the small deliberate errors, the bishop left hanging a half-move too long, the obvious line not taken, the card played that no one would really play. They were losing on purpose. Not clumsily; they were good at it, they had clearly been doing it all summer, all their lives perhaps, with every powerful man's daughter they had ever been coached to companion — but to the boy, who read the weather under every move, it was

as loud as shouting. They lost to her because you did not beat her. Because she was *his* daughter, the powerful man's, the feared man's, and somewhere in the long unspoken grammar of the fearful house it had been made clear, the way everything in that house was made clear without ever being said, that the girl was to be let win. Always. At everything. That her victories were to be arranged and her defeats prevented, because a great man's daughter does not lose, and the people around her are there to see that she doesn't.

And the girl knew. That was the part that turned the boy's stomach, the same part that had finished him at the dinner table. She was far too clever not to know. She sat at the inlaid board and won and won and won, and her face while she won was the emptiest thing the boy had ever seen, because every single victory was a fresh proof of the wall around her — proof that no one would meet her as real, that even her *games* were a kind of theatre staged for her by frightened people, that she could not even *lose*, could not even have that, the small honest human experience of being beaten by a friend, because there were no friends, there were only companions who had been told to let her win, and a whole house arranged so that nothing in her life was ever, ever true.

So on the fourth afternoon, the boy beat her.

He did not plan it, exactly. Or — he did, but the planning was so fast and so deep it felt like instinct, the same instinct that had kept him out of his father's storms: he sat down across the inlaid board from her, and the two companions watched with their bright coached wariness, and the men in dark clothes stood at the edges of the day as they always did, and the boy looked at the loneliest girl in the world and made a decision that he understood, even at sixteen, even without knowing the shape of what he'd been sent to do, was the most important decision of his life.

He played to win.

He was good at chess — it was a thing of the mind, and his mind was the part of him that worked — and he played her honestly, fully, with everything he had, respect in every move, the way no one had played her in years. And he watched her face change as she realised it. He watched the emptiness crack. Because she felt it within four moves — she was far too good not to — she felt the difference, the *resistance*, a real mind on the other side of the board pushing back against hers, not folding, not arranging her a victory, but trying, truly trying, to beat her, and her eyes lifted to his with a look the boy would remember for the rest of his life: wild, disbelieving, half-frightened, the look of a person served the one dish they had long since stopped letting themselves want.

She fought him. God, she fought him — she was better than he was, really, sharper, faster, and for a while the boy thought he would lose after all, and found he didn't care, because the *fight* was the gift, the realness of it, win or lose. But she made one error, late, a small one, reaching too hard for an attack because she was unused to being pressed, and the boy saw it, and his late clumsy traitor body did the one thing it could always do cleanly, which was move a chess piece,

and he took the line, and three moves later he said it, quietly, into the held silence of the games room:

“Checkmate.”

The two companions went very still. The boy felt the weather of the room lurch — their alarm, sharp and genuine, the alarm of people watching a rule broken, *you do not beat her*, and under it the colder attention of the men at the edges, suddenly listening. He had done a forbidden thing. He felt the whole fearful house turn its head.

And the girl looked down at the board, at the checkmate, at her own king toppled by a real hand for the first time in longer than she could probably remember —

— and she *laughed*.

It came out of her like something breaking open, like water through a wall, a real laugh, startled and bright and entirely unposed, the first true sound he had heard her make, and her face when she looked up at him was *lit*, lit from the inside, transformed, years younger, because being beaten — being beaten honestly, by someone who had actually tried — meant being treated as *real*, meant that for one moment in the whole arranged theatre of her life something had been allowed to be *true*, and she had lost, fairly, to a person who saw her as a worthy opponent and not as a great man’s daughter to be managed and let win.

“You beat me,” she said. She said it wonderingly, almost laughing still, as though he had performed a miracle, and in the economy of that house he supposed he had. “Nobody—” She stopped. Her eyes were bright and wet and amazed. “Nobody beats me.”

“You made one mistake,” the boy said. “Right at the end. You went for the attack too early. You didn’t need to.” He paused, and then, because he could not help it, because he had spent his life being managed and lied to and let win at nothing, he gave her the truest thing he had: “You’re better than me. You should have won. You’ll beat me next time, easily, now you know I’m actually playing.” He looked at her, openly, the recognition right there in his face again, *I see you, I won’t pretend with you, not ever*. “I’m not going to let you win. I want you to know that. Not at anything. Not ever. You’ll have to actually beat me, and you mostly will, and when you lose it’ll be real.” He almost smiled. “I think you’ve had enough people letting you win.”

The games room was silent. Somewhere at the edge of it a man in dark clothes was, the boy knew, filing this, reporting it upward, the strange foreign boy who had broken the rule and beaten the daughter. He had probably done something dangerous. He found, again, that he did not care.

Because the girl was looking at him as though he had reached through the wall — the wall she had built against a world that only ever came at her sideways — and simply, impossibly, *touched her*, person to person, the first hand to reach her straight-on in years. And the boy, looking back, knew the feeling exactly,

because she had done the same thing to him without trying, four nights ago, across the candles: she had failed to manage him, and he had failed to manage her, and two children who had each been certain they were the only one in all the world had just discovered, across a board of inlaid stone, the unbearable, life-changing truth.

There were two of them.

It was the beginning of the only honest thing either of them would ever have. And it was already, though neither of them knew it, the end of the warm man's quiet work — because the boy had been sent to spy on a lonely girl, and instead he had just refused, in front of witnesses, to let her lose, and a boy who will not even let you lose at chess is not a boy who will ever sell you to the men in dark clothes.

He had chosen her over his task in three moves and a single word, and he had not even noticed he was doing it, because to him it had not felt like a choice at all. It had felt like recognising his own face. It had felt like the most natural thing in the world.

It had felt like seeing someone, the way he had always, only ever, wished to be seen.

Chapter 6 — The Grey Scraps

The summer became the only honest thing either of them had ever had, and the boy spent it committing a quiet, daily treason against the men who had sent him, and the treason was this: he refused to use her.

They were inseparable after the chess. The house allowed it — encouraged it, even, which was the bitter joke the boy understood and the girl did not, that the men in dark clothes who reported upward were *pleased* the foreign boy had got close, because close was the point, close was the assignment, and they had no idea that the boy had gotten close in the one way that made the assignment impossible. They thought he was working. He let them think it. That was the first of the grey scraps.

Because he did have to report. The warm man's structure reached even here — there was a way the boy was meant to pass along what he learned, a dull mechanism he will not, even now, in his own head, fully reconstruct, because it belongs to a part of that summer he has spent his life not looking at directly. What matters is what he passed, and what he didn't.

He passed the grey. He passed the dull. He learned, over the long bright weeks, a great deal about the girl's father and his world, because the girl told him things — she had never had anyone to tell things to, and they came out of her in a flood, the way water comes through a wall once the first brick is gone, and the boy listened, and some of it was exactly what the men wanted: the shape of the

father's business, his moods, his rivals, the things to do with money and land and the things being dug out of the ground somewhere far away that the boy never fully understood and didn't try to. He passed enough of that — the boring, the public-adjacent, the things a careful reading of a newspaper might have yielded anyway — to make the men believe the assignment was bearing fruit. To make them believe they were getting *all of it*. He fed them just enough true grey to keep them satisfied and incurious, the way you feed a watchdog enough to keep it from barking, and he had a gift for knowing exactly how much that was, because his whole life had been the study of how much a dangerous thing needed in order to leave you alone.

And he held back the rest. He held back everything that was *hers*. Everything that could be used against her, or against the few things in her life that were soft. The things she told him at night, by the lake, that were not about her father's money but about her own caged heart — those he buried so deep he would never speak them, not to the men, not to anyone, not ever. When she let slip something that his gift told him was dangerous — a weakness of the father's, a fear, a fault-line the men in dark clothes would have *paid* for — the boy felt the danger of it land in the room like a dropped glass, and he took it, and he folded it away, and he never passed it on, and he steered her, gently, off the subject, the way you steer a child away from a road. He decided what was safe for them to know and what was not, and he decided it alone, a sixteen-year-old in a frightening house, weighing each thing the loneliest girl in the world told him and asking himself one question only: *will this hurt her*.

He did not understand what the information was *for*. That was the strange, grey, unheroic truth of it, the thing that made the protecting harder and also purer. There was no villain's plan he was foiling, no plot, no bomb, nothing he could have named to a judge. It was business. It was grey men wanting grey advantage over a grey powerful man, mining and money and leverage in some boardroom he would never see, and the boy could not have told you, then or now, how a given fact would have been used, or by whom, or to what end. He was a child being asked to gather pieces of a puzzle he could not see the picture of, for people who would not show him the box.

And that — he understood this much later, and it was the thing he was most quietly proud of in his whole life — *that* was exactly why he wouldn't gamble her on it. A braver, stupider boy might have reasoned it out: *it's only business, it's probably harmless, what's the worst that happens*. But the boy could not see the picture, and because he could not see the picture, he could not promise himself that any single piece was safe, and because he could not promise himself a piece was safe, he would not hand it over — because on the other end of his not-knowing was a real girl, the only person who had ever met him as real, and you do not bet a real person on a puzzle you can't see. You do not spend what you love to satisfy men who won't show you why. When you cannot measure the cost, you assume the cost is everything, and you keep the thing safe.

So he kept her safe. Piece by piece, night by night, all that long bright summer,

the boy who had been sent as a weapon quietly disarmed himself, and fed the men their grey scraps, and held the rest, and the girl never knew — never knew there had been anything to hold, never knew the warm boy who beat her at chess had walked into her life as an instrument and chosen, every single day, not to be one. She only knew that for one summer, for the first time in her life, there was a person who saw her, all the way down, and wanted nothing from her, and let her win sometimes and beat her sometimes and always, always, told her the truth.

She thought it was the start of her life. He could see her thinking it — see the wall coming down, brick by brick, see her begin, tentatively, terribly, to *hope*, to believe that the loneliness was over, that she had been wrong about being the only one, that here at last was proof that a person could be met and held and known. He could see her building a future on him, the way he would have himself — the way the starved always do at the first warmth.

And the boy, watching her hope, carried something that grew heavier every bright day, because he knew a thing she didn't.

He knew the summer would end. He knew the men would call him home. And he knew — because he read weather, because he had always known how every storm in his life would end before it broke — that when they called him home, they would not let this be a thing that had a future. That the warm man, who had built him and aimed him and sent him, would not permit the instrument to keep loving the target. That there was an ending coming, an ending the boy could already feel in the falling glass, and that it was going to be the cruellest thing he had ever done, and that he was going to do it, and that he was going to do it *to protect her*, and that she would never, ever understand why.

He said nothing. He let her hope. He gave her the whole bright summer unshadowed, because it was the only gift he could give her that the men could not take, and he carried the ending alone, the way he had carried everything alone, the way he always would.

He had read storms his whole life before they broke. Now he read this one, alone, the storm coming for the only good thing either of them had ever had — and said nothing, and smiled, and played chess by the lake, and let her believe, for a few more weeks, that she was no longer the only one.

Chapter 7 — Look Through Her

The order came the way he had known it would, near the end, in a grey envelope of words that meant: you are finished here, come home, and the thing you have been is over.

There was an instruction with it, and the instruction was the cruellest sentence the boy had ever been handed, and it was handed to him without weight, the way

everything in that world was handed over, as though it were nothing, as though it did not require him to take a knife to the only living thing he had.

He was to break it clean. He was to give her no reason. He was to let her believe, when he vanished out of her life, that she had been wrong about him — that he had been, after all, like everyone else, a person who approached her sideways and then left, that the summer had meant to him a fraction of what it had meant to her, that she had imagined the being-seen, imagined the recognition, imagined that she was no longer the only one. And worst of all, the part that he would carry like a stone in the chest for the rest of his life: if he ever, by any chance, in any year to come, passed her in the world — at a station, in a street, across a room — he was to *look through her.* To show no flicker. To treat her as a stranger, and not even a kind one — as a slightly mad stranger, a person it would be faintly embarrassing to acknowledge, someone you do not know and have never known and would prefer did not approach.

That was the instruction. Erase her. And make her believe the erasure, so completely that she would never speak his name, never go looking, never give the men a single thread to pull — because the whole safety of the thing, for them, depended on her believing it had been nothing, and the whole safety of the thing, for *her*, the boy understood with a clarity that nearly broke him, also depended on her believing it had been nothing, because if she ever once said aloud what the summer had really been, if she ever once named the foreign boy as someone who had truly known her, the men in dark clothes would want to know exactly what he had known, and what he might have heard, and what she might have told him, and the protecting he had done all summer would come undone in a single loving sentence from her mouth.

So the cruelty was also the protection. That was the trap of it, the thing that let him do it: the only way to keep her safe from the men was to make her believe he had never cared. He had spent the whole summer holding back the grey scraps to keep her safe. Now he had to hold back *himself* — the truest thing he had, the fact of how much she mattered — and bury it so deep and so convincingly that she would let him go without a fight, without a question, without ever knowing there had been anything to fight for. He had to break her heart to save her life. He had to become, on purpose, in her memory, the very thing she had feared the whole world was: one more person who had not really seen her at all.

He did it by the lake, on one of the last evenings, and he will not, ever, describe it in full, even to himself, because some things a man does are too cruel to revisit even when they were right, *especially* when they were right.

He made himself cold. He, who read weather, who knew exactly how to be warm because warmth was the one thing he had always craved — he turned the warmth off, deliberately, like a man putting out a fire with his own hands, and he was careless with her, and distant, and a little cruel, and he watched his own gift work in reverse, watched himself use everything he knew about reading a person to *wound* one, to push her exactly where it would hurt most, to make her believe the

summer had been a small thing to him and that she had embarrassed herself by thinking otherwise. He watched the hope go out of her face. He watched the wall come back up, brick by brick, faster than it had come down, and behind the wall he watched something worse than loneliness arrive — *confirmation*. The terrible settling of a person who had dared, once, to believe she was wrong about being the only one, and who was now being shown, by the one person she had trusted, that she had been right all along. That there was no meeting. That she was unmeetable. That the warmth had been her own foolish invention and the world was exactly as cold as she had always known it to be.

He gave her that. On purpose. It was the worst thing he ever did and he did it perfectly, because he loved her, and because a botched job would have left a thread, and a thread would have killed her. He made himself the proof of her deepest fear so that the men would never come asking, and he did it so well that she did not cry in front of him — she had too much of her father's house in her for that — she simply went still, and correct, and poised, and looked at him with carefully blank eyes that had, an hour before, been the most alive eyes he had ever seen, and filed him, at last, where she had tried to file him the first night across the candles: as one more person who approached sideways and left.

And then he went home, and never saw her again.

He was sixteen, going on seventeen. He had been given a gift — the seeing of people — and he had used it, in the end, for the one thing the men who valued it had never intended: to recognise the loneliest person in the world, and to protect her, and then to convince her he had done neither.

He told himself it was mercy. It was mercy. He has never stopped telling himself, and it has never stopped being true, and it has never once stopped hurting, because the thing about a mercy like that — a mercy you commit in disguise, a kindness that has to wear the mask of cruelty to work — is that the person you save never knows you saved them. There was no version of the protecting in which she got to keep the truth. To save her, he had to let her remember him as a lie.

That was the cost. He paid it. He went home with it, and he told no one, and he carried it down all the years, the boy who broke the only honest thing he ever had on purpose, to keep it safe, and never got to know whether it stayed safe, and never got to be remembered as anything but the warmth that turned cold by a lake.

The men were pleased with him. He had done the job. He had, they believed, gotten what they wanted from the girl and then closed it out cleanly, the loose end tied, the girl none the wiser. They did not know that he had given them grey scraps and kept the gold. They did not know that the cold closing-out had been the most loving thing he had ever done. They did not know anything real about it at all, because the boy had made sure they didn't, the same way he had made sure of everything, by reading exactly how much the dangerous thing needed in order to leave him — and her — alone.

He was good at his job. It was the one time in his life he was ever sorry to be good at anything.

Chapter 8 — The Men Who Vanished

And then, as if to prove that none of it had ever even mattered, the whole apparatus that had reached into his life and aimed him and spent him simply — went away.

It did not end with a reckoning. There was no knock on the door, no exposure, no consequence, nothing that would have given the thing he had done a shape, a meaning, a place in a story. It just dissolved. The way these things do, the boy learned — the way a regime, a structure, a quiet office off a long corridor, a network of warm men and dark-clothed men, can be the entire weather of your life one year and a thing that no longer exists the next. Something changed, somewhere far above him, in the grey rooms where the picture he had never been shown was kept. A government turned over. A ministry was folded into another ministry and then into nothing. The men who had run the clever children's summers, who had watched him in the gardens, who had named his gift and handed him the grey envelope and the cruel instruction — they were gone. Reassigned, retired, disappeared, the boy never knew which, because that was the nature of them, they were people whose whole craft was to leave no thread, and when their time came they pulled their own thread last of all and vanished without a sound.

He waited, the first year, for them to call again. He had been told he was promising. He had half-believed, in the cold months after the lake, that there would be more — more tasks, more grey envelopes, a whole shadowed life laid out for the boy who saw people. He dreaded it and, in a part of himself he was ashamed of, he almost wanted it, because at least it would have meant the summer had been *real*, had been the start of something, had mattered enough to continue. If they used him again, then what he had done by the lake would have been a chapter and not just a wound. It would have been *for* something.

They never called.

The summers at the institute stopped — the programme changed, or ended, or became something else he was no longer part of. No one ever contacted him about the girl, or the house by the lake, or anything he had heard or held or buried. The grey scraps he had fed them and the gold he had kept back turned out, in the end, to matter to no one at all — the mining, the money, the leverage in the boardroom he never saw, whatever it had been *for*, it had dissolved along with the men, gone wherever defunct intentions go, and the boy was left holding a secret that no longer had a single other person in the world who knew it existed.

That was the strangest part, and it took him years to understand it. He had spent a summer in mortal moral seriousness — had weighed every word, protected a

life, broken his own heart on purpose — and the people he had done it all *against* had simply wandered off and forgotten he existed, as casually as a man forgets a tool he set down in a field. To them he had been an experiment that didn't pan out, an asset that retired, a line in a file that got shredded when the office closed. The axis of his whole inner life had been, to them, administrative. Disposable. Already, by the time he stopped waiting for the call, almost certainly destroyed.

He had been backed into a corner once — the only time in his life, he would realise, that he was ever truly cornered, a sixteen-year-old with a grey envelope and a girl by a lake and no one to ask — and he had found his way out the only way he knew, by reading the weather and protecting the soft thing and paying the cost himself. And his reward for getting it right was a loneliness deeper than any he had known as a clumsy boy at the edge of a field: the loneliness of a sacrifice with no witness. Nobody ever knew. Nobody ever came. He had passed the hardest test of his moral life alone, in the dark, against a danger that then evaporated, to protect someone who would never know they were protected — and the only other person who had been in that room with him, the girl, he had made remember it as a betrayal. He was good at carrying things alone. This was a new weight even for him, and he carried it down into his adult life without a name for it: the boy the world had aimed and missed, and simply set down in a field, and walked away from, forever.

He grew up. He became ordinary, which was easy, because ordinary was a kind of hiding and he had always been good at not being seen. He built a small quiet life as far from grey corridors as he could get. He told no one — there was no one to tell, and no one would have believed it, and the telling would have meant explaining the cruelty by the lake, and he could not bear, ever, to say aloud the worst thing he had ever done even though it had been right. He let the whole of it sink down inside him, the institute and the warm man and the house and the games room and the lake and the cold closing-out, until it was a thing that had happened to someone else, a story he sometimes wasn't sure he hadn't dreamed.

But he never forgot her. That was the one thing time could not dissolve. The men vanished, the task evaporated, the picture he was never shown was lost forever — but the girl stayed, the loneliest person he had ever met, the one who had laughed when he beat her at chess, the one he had made himself a stranger to, by a lake, on purpose, with love.

He never knew what became of her. And that — not the men, not the task, not the secret — that was the thing he would carry, unhealed, into every year of the rest of his life.

Chapter 9 — The Thing He Never Knew

Years later — many years, a whole life later, a grown man now with a grown man's quiet days — he would sometimes find himself thinking about her, and

the thought always arrived the same way, uninvited, sideways, the way she had once approached the whole world before he beat her at chess and let her come at it straight.

He would be doing something ordinary. Making coffee. Walking. Sitting with the soft warm hands that had learned, over a life, to be gentle, that had held things and mended things and touched the people he loved with a care that the boy at the kitchen table could never have imagined he'd grow into. And she would be there, suddenly, the loneliest girl in the world, lit from inside, laughing across a board of inlaid stone — *nobody beats me* — and the man would have to stop for a moment, and put down whatever he was holding, because the missing of her never got smaller, it only got quieter, the way the loudest grief eventually learns to live in a house without breaking the furniture.

He had kept his promise. That was the thing. He had never gone looking. In all the years, with all the ways a person can now find another person, he had never once typed her name, never once searched, never once pulled the single thread that might have told him where she was, or who she had become, or whether she was even still in the world. He told himself it was the old discipline, the safety, the rule — *never contact, look through her, no thread* — and some of it was. But most of it, he knew, was something else, something worse and more tender: he could not bear to find out that she had never recovered. That the cold closing-out by the lake, the proof-of-her-deepest-fear he had handed her on purpose to save her, had done exactly what such things do, and left her more walled, more certain, more alone than ever. He could not bear to learn that in saving her life he had taken the one summer that might have taught her she was meetable and turned it, in her memory, into the final evidence that she was not. So he never looked. He left her where he had left her, by the lake, with the wall back up, and he did not go to see what the wall had become.

And so he never knew the thing he most wanted to know, the question that sat under all the others, the one he turned over on the quiet ordinary days for the rest of his life:

Did it save her too?

Because it had saved him. That was the strange grace he had carried out of that frightening house: the summer, for all its cruelty at the end, had given the boy the one thing he had never had and never expected to get — the proof, lived in his own body, that he was not the only one. He had walked into that house certain he was singular and unmeetable, alone in a way no one else was, built slightly wrong for the world. And a poised lonely girl had looked at him across a table and failed to file him, and laughed when he beat her at chess, and told him things by a lake that she had never told anyone, and in doing so she had shown him, beyond any arguing, that the loneliness he had thought was uniquely his was *shared*, that there was at least one other person alive who lived behind the same wall, made of the same brick, and that therefore the wall was not the truth about him — it was just a wall, and walls have another side, and on the other

side, once, for one summer, there had been someone exactly like him. He had spent the rest of his life on that proof. It had let him build a real life, marry, love, hold soft warm hands out to the people who came near him and not flinch them away. *She* had done that. The loneliest girl in the world had cured him of being the only one, without ever knowing she had, and then he had made her believe he was just one more stranger.

But had it gone both ways? Did *she* ever stop, on one of her own ordinary days, and remember a strange foreign boy who beat her at chess and would not let her win at anything and saw her, all the way down, before he turned cold and left? And if she did — this was the unbearable fork, the one he could never resolve — did she remember it as the betrayal he had made it look like? Or had some deep reading part of her, like his own, kept the truer record underneath the cold ending, and known the warmth had been *real*, that whatever the boy did at the lake, he had not been faking the chess, or the seeing? He had possibly saved her exactly as she had saved him. He had possibly destroyed the very thing that would have saved her. And he was not permitted — not by the men, not by the rule, not by his own unbearable tenderness — to ever find out which.

So he hoped. In the end that was all he let himself have. He hoped that somewhere there was a woman, no longer young, who remembered being beaten at chess and laughing for the first true time in her life, and who had kept, under the cold ending, the knowledge that it was real — who had carried out of that summer the same proof he had, *you are not the only one,* and let it teach her to hold her own hands out to the people who came near her. He hoped the gift had survived the lie. He had no way to know if it had. He never would.

But he hoped it, on the quiet ordinary days, with the soft warm hands that her laughter had, in some sense he could never explain to anyone, helped to make gentle. He hoped it for her the way you hope for someone you saw once, truly, all the way down — and were never allowed to tell.

And that was the whole of it. A boy who read weather, and a girl who won every game, and one summer in a frightening house above a lake, and a mercy committed in disguise, and a cost paid alone with no witness, and a secret carried down a lifetime, and at the bottom of all of it, the one thing he never got to know and never stopped wanting to:

whether, somewhere, she remembered him true.

A Note on the Real Thing Underneath

This story grew, the way stories do, from a small real soil, and the real soil deserves a few honest words — partly because it was the best thing in my own childhood, and partly because it is quietly vanishing from the record, and a thing that is not written down is a thing that gets to be forgotten.

In apartheid-era South Africa there really was a programme for so-called *gifted*

children, and I was in it. In my school's yearbook it is printed plainly across the top of the page — **VERRYKINGSONDERWYS**, "Enriching Education," the **VO klas** — and I am in the photograph beneath it, a row of solemn children in blazers, listed by name. It began in primary school. While the rest of the timetable held the ordinary South African school day of the time — Bible study, singing, physical training, and, in high school, the things I will come to in a moment — a handful of us were pulled out and taken somewhere else to do something then almost unimaginable for a child of that age and place: **LOGO programming** on early computers, the little on-screen turtle drawing its geometry; **critical thinking**; **philosophy**; the open-ended, argue-it-out, take-it-apart kind of learning that the rest of the timetable had no room for. Being clever bought you out of the things you dreaded. It was, for a child who did not fit the ordinary mould, the first place that fitting did not matter — and I have never forgotten it.

My school was **Bethlehem Voortrekker Hoërskool**, in Bethlehem, in the Free State. The enrichment itself was run from a separate **Sentrum vir Verrykende Onderwys** in **Bloemfontein** — a centre for this enriching education, real, and now nearly invisible (it survives, faintly, in the record: there exists, for instance, a university architecture thesis built entirely around the idea of such a *sentrum* in that city). I travelled there, three weeks a year, for several years. The strange thing — the thing that first set me writing this note — is how *little* of it can now be found. You can search and search and come up with almost nothing.

And here is the part that matters to the story you have just read, because it is the world the boy in this book is taken *out* of. The ordinary half of that schooling was militarised in a way that is hard to convey now. It was the apartheid era, and a boys' high school of that time and place ran on **cadets** — *kadette* — with real drill, real rank, a *Seunsdrilpeloton* (a boys' drill platoon) that won inter-school **cadet competitions**, schoolboys made "best junior drill sergeant," the whole apparatus of a small army worn by children. And there was a **safe in the school with .22 rifles in it**, for the shooting competitions — boys taught to shoot, to compete at it, marksmanship treated as an ordinary school sport. That was the normal water we swam in. So when a clever, soft, ill-fitting child was pulled out of the drilling and the singing and the rifles, and taken instead to a quiet room to learn philosophy and to make a turtle draw a square — you can perhaps feel why it was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and also why a child shaped by that whole world, the drill and the rifles and the enrichment alike, might grow up unusually easy to recruit, and unusually able to read the weather of a room. Both halves are real. The fiction lives in the space between them.

What the wider record holds confirms it was no invention of memory. South Africa in the 1980s did, unusually, foreground the education of gifted children — a programme not free of the era's ugly racial agenda, though by the late 1980s the needs of gifted Black children were at least being formally acknowledged and a dedicated school motivated for. The **Transvaal Education Department ran "Extracurricular Centres for Highly Gifted Children,"** a distinctively South African out-of-school provision; the best-documented of the

sister institutions, the **Schmerenbeck Educational Centre** in Johannesburg, ran enrichment and acceleration streams until it closed in 1995. The growth of this whole "gifted education movement" in the country was tracked in academic work of the time. And the specific, vivid detail — small South African children being taught **LOGO** in these programmes — is corroborated beyond my own recollection: others who passed through gifted education in this country in that era remember the turtle and the code exactly as I do.

So the world in this novel is real: the LOGO, the philosophy, the critical thinking, the cadets and the drilling and the rifles in the school safe, the reward of being excused from all of it. The school is real, the *sentrum* is real, the city is real. The loneliness of the clever, ill-fitting child, and the strange grace of being taken somewhere that finally had room for such a mind — those are as real as anything I know.

The real programme was a genuine and quiet good, and I would not want a real teacher who ran a VO klas, or a real child who sat in one, to read anything but their own good memory in these pages. The LOGO, the turtle, the philosophy, the *Sentrum* in Bloemfontein, the three weeks a year when fitting in did not matter — that was real, and it was good, and it is nearly gone, and so I am putting it here, where it cannot quite disappear.

If you were a VO child too — if you remember the turtle, or the *sentrum*, or being pulled out of the drilling for an afternoon of philosophy — I would like to hear from you. We were there. It happened. And somewhere in Bloemfontein, the last I knew, there is a time capsule we buried, waiting.

— *Andries J. Greyling*

A few of the surviving traces, for anyone who wants to look: the architecture thesis "Sentrum vir verrykende onderwys binne utopiese meesterplanontwikkeling van verlore stadsweefsel te Bloemfontein"; Merilyn Dewar's 1986 University of Cape Town thesis "The growth of the Gifted Education Movement in South Africa"; the records of the Transvaal Education Department's Extracurricular Centres for Highly Gifted Children; and the history of the Schmerenbeck Educational Centre, Johannesburg (closed 1995). The rest — much of what *Verrykingsonderwys* actually was, day to day, in those rooms — seems to live now only in the memories of the children who were there, and in a handful of school yearbooks like the one this note is drawn from.