

**BREATHE
DEEP
& SWIM**

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ONE

NOT MIDNIGHT

It felt like a phantom clock was striking midnight.

I thought I heard twelve chimes, but maybe they were ringing somewhere off in the distance. Maybe I was just imagining it because the sound of midnight—that finite clang—would have fittingly stamped this moment. But even without hearing the distinctive ringing of a midnight bell, even without confirmation of the time, I’d always remember this moment. At some point in the night, Dad had died, and we’d been left to figure out the rest of our lives, or at least the next few hours.

I’d never seen a corpse before, not in its organic form, before being preserved in a coffin—only after being coiffed and cleaned to a perfection that never replicated the actual living person I once knew.

At Uncle Earl’s funeral, he’d worn an intensely black suit with a matching tie, but he’d once said he would rather die than wear one. Well, I guess the suit was fitting then, because if he’d taken one look at that Windsor knot, he would have dropped dead on the spot.

Lying in that shiny coffin, Uncle Earl had been like a wax statue, a pristine, unnatural representation, not the Uncle Earl we knew. That wax figure wouldn’t ruffle my hair while saying, “When are you going to cut that thing? Are you looking to grow a pet?” It’d always driven me crazy when he said that, but he was being true to who he was; he was his authentic self. In that coffin, any semblance of authenticity he’d once

had dissipated, leaving a body in a proper suit. I supposed he'd been prepared and preserved to look like that for an audience, to appear "more palatable."

This was different though, and not because the dead man lying in the bed was my dad. This was different because my dad still looked like himself. He wasn't made up for anyone; his life had just faded away. His lily-pad-green eyes were dull and staring at nothing on the ceiling. His jaw was slack. He looked like he was waiting to sleep, but his soul had left his body instead.

The most potent difference was the absence of living movements. He was missing those subtle movements, like adjusting himself under the bedspread, or twitching his nose from time to time. He was missing his stare, when he would focus on a particular point as if to turn it over in his mind before slightly shaking his head to refocus his eyes. His dark-brown hair somehow had lost its sheen, which seemed impossible since it had grown oily from not showering for days on end.

It was his stillness that filled the room. His severe lack of movement connected him to all other corpses, but because he wasn't in the standard coffin, in the standard funeral home, I couldn't shake the expectation of seeing him move. It was almost like I was taking for granted that people *could* move. Even if you were a quadriplegic, your eyes could move back and forth, and your chest would rise and fall with every breath you took.

It was impossible to mistake a dead man for what he was, and however I felt about this situation, I *knew* that he was dead.

"Wolfgang, why is this door open?" Van Gogh called from the hall. His footsteps began to slow to a stop as he hesitated to enter the room. We both knew this room was off-limits, and we both knew why.

Normally I followed the rules, especially ones set by Van Gogh, but I'd felt compelled to go into our dad's room, almost as if...as if I knew that I would find my dead dad lying in his own filth. As I mentioned, it had been a while since he'd showered.

"Wolfgang, why are you in here? You know you shouldn't—holy shit!" Van Gogh shouted, stopping a few feet away from the bed.

Although my brother's eyes were usually a mirror image of our dad's lily-pad-green ones, his naturally seemed livelier. In fact, they seemed to be expanding and retracting, if that was even possible.

I had no idea how to respond, other than to say what we both knew was a lie.

"I don't know what happened. He just ... died."

He just died. Yes, he had, that was obviously true, but we both knew what happened, we both knew the cause.

Van Gogh ran his fingers through his short dark-brown hair, staring down at the body.

"Shit, shit, *shit*." My brother didn't always know what to say in uncomfortable situations, but that was probably because he was rarely uncomfortable. Even when he got into verbal boxing matches with Dad, he didn't seem uncomfortable, just angry and disgusted. But now, as he continued to run his fingers through his hair, it was obvious that he was severely uncomfortable.

"I know. I don't know what happened. I just found him here," I repeated. Normally, I was very verbose. It probably came from the fact that I was a bona fide bookworm, at least that's what my teachers told me. That was one of the reasons I did so well on my compositions, especially in English class. I usually knew how to sew together sentences that sounded articulate, but not obnoxiously so. Dad always said I was too smart for my own good, and that he couldn't understand a word I was saying—but that was because he wasn't really listening. He never really tried to understand.

"What are you even doing in here? You know you shouldn't be in here without a mask!" Van Gogh exclaimed, adjusting his white N95 mask.

"I mean, does it really matter anymore? He's dead," I said, reaching for the mask tucked in my back pocket.

"Wolfgang, we don't know if he's still contagious!" Van Gogh cried as he pulled a pair of gloves out of a pocket in his tattered Levi's. He handed them to me before helping me adjust my mask. "There, that's better."

We simultaneously looked down at the stiffening body. I didn't feel his skin, but I knew my dad's body was getting colder and that rigor mortis

would set in at some point; it was only a matter of time. However, how much time we had, who knew? I couldn't tell you what time it was.

It was at that point that I asked the obvious yet complex question I knew was on both of our minds. "Now what?"

Van Gogh took a deep breath, so deep that I could feel him holding it for some time—as if he needed the oxygen, any oxygen, even if it were contaminated. He slowly exhaled as he looked over our dad's body.

"Now? We need to get out of this room," he said, taking hold of my hand and walking me into the hall. My brother hadn't held my hand since I was eight years old and he was ten. Even though Dad had never instructed Van Gogh to do so, he'd always taken hold of my hand as we walked across the street.

Although it was six years later, and I knew that as a high school freshman I was a little too old to walk hand in hand with my older brother, I was reluctant to let go. Van Gogh had always been my life raft. I knew I needed him, and I also knew I could always rely on him.

Although my brother's plans weren't always fully thought through, I knew he would have one. I knew he would do everything in his power to get us safely across that street.

When we were in the hall, Van Gogh released my hand and walked over to the couch, but he didn't sit down. Instead, he just walked around it, circling it like a vulture waiting for the right moment to land.

I pulled off my mask and tucked both the mask and the gloves into my back pocket. I couldn't help but watch my brother as he continued to circle the couch, looking down at the brown carpet.

"What should we do?" I just needed to ask this question. Van Gogh always knew what to do, even if he acted on a whim, which he usually did. Me, on the other hand . . . it took me forever to construct a plan. I had to think it through too much; I'd always anticipate the worst-case scenario and would end up scrapping fully formed plans. But not Van Gogh. No, he would just go with it and whatever happened, happened.

Also, my brother would take full responsibility for his actions, but he never seemed to regret them. For example, when he'd been caught tagging

a wall when he was into graffiti art, he said that if Keith Haring could do it, why couldn't he? Granted, I'm sure Haring's younger brother didn't have to use his lawn mowing money to bail his brother out of jail, like I did. Even though our dad had yelled at him for a good hour about getting arrested and focusing more on his art than anything else, Van Gogh didn't seem remorseful. Although he never apologized to Dad for his actions, he did apologize to me because he knew that it had taken me a while to earn what became his bail money.

The following week, I'd found my money paid back with interest on my dresser. It was only later that I learned that my brother pawned some of his new art supplies to pay me back. I didn't even attempt to get them back because I knew that if I did, it would hurt his pride. We never spoke of the incident again because there was no need to; we were brothers. We would do anything for one another. That was just a fact.

For this reason, whatever decision Van Gogh made would affect the both of us, and he knew it. He normally worked well under pressure because he never let it get to him, but this was different. We both knew whatever decision he made would determine our fate. Nevertheless, he would figure out what to do. I didn't need to worry because whatever he decided, that was what we were going to do. Even if it wasn't the perfect plan, he would make sure it all worked out in the end. He always did.

I knew not to disturb my brother while he was thinking, so I calmly took a seat in the chair adjacent to the couch. I was tempted to pick up the book I'd left under the coffee table, not to read it but just to feel it in my hands. There was just something about holding a book, any book, that just put me at ease.

I eyed the spine, a cracked white crease severing the dull orange spine that read: *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D Salinger. You only needed to read the book once to know why the publisher chose to emphasize the words "catcher" and "rye" in the title, but I chose to read it about a dozen times, to the point where the annotations I jotted in the margins could be time stamped by the evolution of my penmanship. I really liked it when even the publisher would provide readers with a subtle hint about the book's

deeper meaning. It was as if even those binding the book recognized its potential greatness.

As I was just about to lean forward to pick up Salinger's coming-of-age tale, Van Gogh stopped in his tracks. He turned toward me but didn't really see me. He seemed to be looking off in the distance, at an indiscriminate part of the wall. It could only mean one thing: Van Gogh had come up with a plan.

"Pack," he commanded. "Empty out our backpacks and pack everything we can carry," he said, marching toward our bedroom.

Pack? Following him into the bedroom, I watched him riffle through his canvas backpack, pulling out every textbook and notebook that he could find until the backpack was completely empty. I don't even think that he left a single pencil in there.

"Pack? Pack for what?" I questioned.

"We're leaving," Van Gogh stated, opening up his dresser drawer and pulling out a few pairs of socks and some of his boxers.

"We're leaving?" I sounded like an echo, mirroring his statements but recreating them into queries. "Why?"

"We have to," he stated, not looking up while continuing to shove his clothes into the backpack, trying to fashion it into a makeshift suitcase. "Damn, this may not be big enough."

"We have to?" Van Gogh didn't even bother to address that echo. He just walked over to my side of the room and emptied out my backpack.

"I know you're going to want to take some books, but don't take too many," my brother warned. "We're probably going to have to carry these backpacks for a while and if they're too heavy, we won't make it."

"We won't make it? Make it where?" Getting tired of my own questions, I shook my head, as if to reconfigure my brain, trying to prevent myself from being a parrot. "Van Gogh, where are we going? Why do we *have* to leave? What is the plan?" My questions came flooding out, a waterfall of inquiries that just seemed to spill out of me. I felt like I was talking a mile a minute, but I couldn't help it, my mouth was trying to catch up to my brain.

“Just pack first, ask questions later,” he stated, punching down his clothes. “We need to make a list of essentials. What we *absolutely* need, not what we would like to have, okay?” Before Van Gogh could move toward our closet, I grabbed his wrist, giving it a firm hold.

At the touch of my hand, he finally looked into my eyes. His were a steady wash of green, with slightly dilated pupils, all nestled under a furrowed brow.

“Van Gogh, please, I need to know what’s going on. Why are we packing?” I pleaded. “I’m not going to fight you on this, I never would, but I need to know what we are doing.”

Van Gogh nodded, knowing me too well.

Although I would follow any plan my brother would put into motion, I needed to know the intricacies of the plan. This applied to anything, really. I had a habit of resisting something unless I knew *exactly* what was happening. For example, when I was little, I would scream when the dentist began to work on me because he had never explained what he was going to do before he stuck his instruments into my mouth. Apparently, I was screaming so much that the dentist was afraid to continue unless my dad agreed to having the dental assistants hold me down and give me a sedative. Although my dad agreed to this, Van Gogh yelled at the dentist when he heard the plan. Unfortunately, since Van Gogh was a kid himself, the adults won in the end.

Maybe it was that instance that caused me to hate doctors. I knew that we needed doctors to survive, especially now that we were in the midst of a global pandemic, but I just couldn’t get over this underlying hatred. Well, actually, it wasn’t not that I hated them, but that I didn’t trust them. I would always trust Van Gogh, though. I trusted him more than anyone else, so whatever we had to do, we were going to do it, but I just needed to know what *exactly* we were doing. I needed to make sense of it first.

Van Gogh took a deep breath and placed my now empty backpack on my bed.

“Wolfgang, we can’t stay here. Pretty soon, the state will discover that Dad died. As far as I know, he is our only living relative in this state. Uncle

Earl was his only brother, who never had any kids, and Dad's parents died a long time ago, so it's just you and me. So, since there is no one who can take us in, we are now wards of the state, which means that we will be placed in foster care. I'm sixteen, so in the state of Florida, I am still a minor—if I were eighteen, it would be a different story, but I'm not. So, it's inevitable that we will go into foster care and then we will be separated. I know that you don't want that to happen, and neither do I, so our only choice is to run away.”

Van Gogh's tone was so calm, but more than calm, it was steady. His tone was a stark contrast to my mind, which was still racing with questions and trying to process what he was telling me.

Words like “foster care” and “separated” kept flipping over and over in my mind. Was he right? Would we wind up in foster care? Would we be separated? He spoke as if he was speaking from experience. Even though I knew he'd never been in foster care, we did go to school with a few classmates who were not only in foster care, but who seemed to jump from home to home. Actually, to call the places where they lived a “home” was entirely inaccurate. They were more like temporary landing bases until they found a home—*if they ever found a home*. I did have one friend, Sophie, who'd found a permanent home with her foster family. Sophie said that she looked so much like her foster parents because they all wore the same black-framed glasses, and like her, her foster mom also had asthma. Although Sophie was adopted by a family that she loved, they'd adopted her when she was a lot younger than us, and she was not adopted with a sibling.

Van Gogh was right. Who was going to adopt two teenage brothers? It was a possibility, but we both knew that it was too slim. Van Gogh was right—we couldn't take that chance, we needed to leave. However, he still hadn't answered all my questions.

“Okay, but where are we running to? We have to be going somewhere, right?”

Van Gogh looked down at my hand, which was still gripping his wrist. When I let go, he placed both of his hands on my shoulders, and continued

to look me right in the eyes. His gaze was even steadier than before, but his pupils seemed to retract a bit, so he looked more like his normal self.

“There’s only one living relative I know about . . . our mom. I know that she ran away when we were both very young, but I remember Dad once mentioning that she lived in New York when they first met. It’s a long trip but we have to make it. It’s our only chance to stay together.”

As I looked up into Van Gogh’s eyes, I nodded, still processing the plan. Van Gogh always had a few inches on me. For this reason, although we were both pretty lanky, his hand-me-downs were always too long for me. I knew that if our dad was still alive, the blue T-shirt and matching jeans that Van Gogh was wearing would be passed down to me in a few months—but now who knew what would be passed down. Our dad was no longer alive to make those decisions, or any decisions at all. So now, we sought a new decision maker. Our mom.

Our mom. I had not heard that phrase in a long time. She left when I was three and Van Gogh was five years old. Dad never spoke about her and didn’t keep any pictures of her in the house. I barely knew anything about her, except that she ran away and that she was the one who named us. I think that’s why Dad felt the need to shorten our names to “Wolf” and “Van.” He couldn’t stand any memory of her in his house, and our names—*our existence*—were constant reminders of her imprint on his life.

“How are we going to get there?” I quickly pulled out my phone and did a search. “It’s nearly 1,200 miles away, and we don’t even know which part of New York she lived in,” I stated, tucking my phone back into my front pocket.

I could feel Van Gogh’s grip tightening a bit before he took his hands away from my shoulders and turned back to my empty backpack.

“The Bronx,” Van Gogh stated, picking up my empty backpack and handing it to me. “She used to live on Pelham Parkway in the Bronx. So, that’s where we’re going—the Bronx, New York. Now, pack.”

“How do you know that?”

Van Gogh shrugged as he looked at my backpack. “I just do.”

“How are we going to get there?” I asked, feeling the weightlessness of my empty backpack.

“I have an idea. First, I need you to pack. We are wasting too much time,” he said.

As he started pulling a couple of T-shirts and light sweaters off hangers, I took a look around our room.

I tried to relive that ubiquitous scenario when your house is on fire and you need to grab everything that is important to you. But I was coming up short.

Van Gogh didn't have to tell me that we would never return—that was a given.

As I scanned the room, I saw cracking white walls that really needed spackling. Aside from the cracks, the walls were dull and bare. In fact, essentially everything was bare. It was almost as if we lived a utilitarian lifestyle. The unmade beds and the clothes in both of our dressers and in the closet were the only signs that the room was lived in, but aside from my books and Van Gogh's art supplies, you would never know that *we* lived in this room.

Before packing any clothes, I decided to put on a few of the bulkier items so I could fit more books in my backpack. As we were nearing autumn, with the temperature cooling, I decided to pull on a sweater and wear my jean jacket over it. I was already wearing a pair of jeans, and my sneakers, so I thought I was wearing enough layers to be warm. Even though it was the middle of the night, I never bothered to change for bed. It was only at night that I could read my books in peace, without hearing Dad's cough reverberating throughout the house, or hearing him calling to Van Gogh to bring him something. With my dad's death, the house had become eerily silent, but I knew that even in this silence, I could never read here again. Van Gogh and I could never stand still here; we needed to keep moving.

I sized up my backpack and determined that I could take about ten paperback books, a few shirts, pants, socks and underwear. After I

rifled through my dresser drawer and closet, I picked out my clothes and smooshed them down into the backpack.

As I scanned the bookcase, I noticed how engorged it was from years of hoarding books. Between the school letting us keep our paperbacks, birthday gifts from Van Gogh, and the library's weekly bookfairs, I genuinely had an abundance of books.

"Not too many," Van Gogh warned as he walked out of our bedroom. "I'm going to see what cash we have lying around."

Alone with my books, I determined that, like with my clothes, I could only take the essentials. But how do you determine which books are *essential*? They were all important to me, every single one, whether they were assigned or I'd chosen them myself. Each book carried a memory for me. I could tell you exactly when I read and reread each of the texts. Only a few were annotated, though. These were irreplaceable, so these would be the ones I needed to take.

I narrowed my selection down to seven essentials: S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*; Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*; Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*; Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*; and Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*. Every single one of these texts had Post-its hanging out the sides and annotations in the margins.

After I put each book in my backpack, I zipped it up and swung it over my shoulder. Although it had more heft now, I could still fit a few extra items in there.

I quickly found J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* underneath the coffee table, unzipped my backpack, and added this to the collection.

I can fit a couple more books in here, I thought as I turned back to our bedroom. But before I could take another good look at the bookcase, I heard my brother calling for me down the hall, from Dad's bedroom.

"Van Gogh?" I questioned, as I inched into the room.

"I'm in the closet!" he yelled. I could see his feet sticking out of the open closet door as he was kneeling on the rug.

I diverted my eyes from looking at our dad's corpse, trying not to imagine it slowly deteriorating.

Van Gogh moved over so that we were both kneeling, looking into the closet.

"So, I was trying to find some money, and I think we hit the motherload," he said as he held a huge wad of cash in front of me. "There has to be over \$1,000 here, easy. I'm sure there is more back here, we just need to look."

I nodded, still trying to process seeing that huge bundle of money. It was wrapped in a dingy, white rubber band, so Dad must have had that money for a while now.

"I checked his wallet too, but there was only about \$20 in there. He had a few credit cards, but those are useless to us," Van Gogh said, as he sifted through a few pairs of shoes and pushed aside our dad's toolbox.

"Why is that useless? Do you think that they are maxed out?" If they were, that wouldn't surprise either one of us. Between paying the bills and our dad's growing bar tab, he had maxed out his cards a few times.

Van Gogh shrugged. "Maybe, but they are traceable. Once someone discovers his body, he will be in the system. If we were to use the credit card of a dead man, the card would be considered stolen, and the police would find us. At least if we use cash, the police can't trace us," Van Gogh reasoned.

"Well, they could trace the serial numbers," I noted.

Van Gogh smirked and shook his head. "You read too many detective stories. Hey, what's that?" he asked, pulling out a small, wooden box, buried deep in the closet. Before I could look at the box, I noticed that hidden behind the box was a stack of papers and two paperback books.

The papers seemed delicate and a little crumpled. In the middle of the papers, there was a photograph of a woman holding a swaddled baby. Before I could inspect the photo, my brother said, "This box is locked."

"What? Locked?"

"Yeah." He pointed out the small brass padlock dangling from the middle of the box. "I didn't see a key, though, did you?"

“No, but it doesn’t look like you open it with a key,” I said, pointing at the four small, metal loops jutting out from the bottom of the lock. Each loop had a set of numbers, zero through nine, etched into the metal. “It looks like a combination lock, but I’ve never seen one like this, have you?”

Van Gogh shook his head as he inspected the lock. “Maybe there’s a slip of paper with the combination on it. Did you find anything like that?”

“No, but I did find this,” I said, showing him the photo.

As my brother inspected the photo, he smiled. “Mom and you. Wow, I almost forgot what she looked like.”

I’d completely forgotten what Mom looked like, as I stared at her shoulder-length, wavy light-brown hair and light-blue eyes. She was smiling down at the baby, who was apparently me. I couldn’t have been older than a few weeks, maybe a few months.

Our dad never displayed any photos, let alone kept any of them, especially of our mom. It was almost as if he was trying to erase her existence from our lives because she left us. However, to our dad, she really left *him*.

“I also found these,” I said as I handed Van Gogh the papers. He placed the box next to him as he carefully, but quickly, unfolded the papers. Once again, he smirked.

“You know what these are? These are our birth certificates.”

I inched over to him to take a closer look. As we inspected the birth certificates, there was no surprising information. Granted, now I knew what the Mayor, Commissioner of Health, and the City Registrar’s signatures looked like, but aside from this, the time of birth and the hospital in Florida were unsurprising. Mother: *Ann Miller*. Father: *Benjamin Stephen Thomas*. It all seemed pretty standard.

My gaze lingered on our full names though: *Van Gogh Vincent Thomas*. *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Thomas*. I couldn’t help but wonder why Mom chose those names. Clearly, Van Gogh’s name matched him perfectly. Although he never expressed a particular interest in post-impressionist art or the need to replicate *Starry Night*, he was unquestionably an artist. Maybe that’s why “Van Gogh” was his first name. Mom had known that

his artistic talents would emerge sooner or later. Maybe that's why she chose "Mozart" as one of my middle names. Perhaps she was questioning whether or not I would be a prodigal musician, like my namesake. By making "Mozart" my second—not even my *first*—middle name, it was almost as if she were planting the seed of musical genius, but she still doubted whether or not it would emerge. Perhaps she had been right in doing so because I couldn't play any instruments, and I enjoyed reading much more than I enjoyed trying to learn how to play music.

"I'll put the certificates in my bag. We may need these," Van Gogh said, as he pulled out his backpack and placed both the wooden box and our birth certificates inside. "Do you see anything else?"

"Just these books," I said, holding up the two paperbacks. One was too thin to be a novel. I inspected the orange cover with a black border, and what looked like an upside-down building with white smoke or clouds bleaching the orange cover and a tiny white airplane shooting out as if it was flying into the lower right border. I read the title to myself, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller. "I wonder if he was related to Mom?" I muttered.

"What?" Van Gogh asked as he stood up.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if Mom was related to Arthur Miller. I mean, they both have the same last name, but maybe that's a coincidence."

"I don't know. In any case, we need to leave soon. I'm going to see if I can find anything else. Meet me by the front door in a few minutes, okay?"

I nodded as Van Gogh left, leaving me to scan the other book cover. A lonely woman, who looked like she was from the Victorian age based on her attire, stared out at the reader with an expression of boredom. The title, *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, hung over her head. Although I had heard of Arthur Miller, I had never read anything by Gustave Flaubert. As I tucked the books under my arm, and stood up, I couldn't help wondering why these books were in the back of our dad's closet—a man who rarely read. Despite not knowing who owned these books, I decided that these were the last two books that I would take with me.