

The Quarry
July 4, 1968

I could have stayed up there for always only.
It's something fails us. First we feel.
Then we fall.
-James Joyce, from *Finnegan's Wake*

The village girl bowed her head in the snowflakes of the approaching storm as she held up the letter to him. In this Himalayan dusk of snow and rock and screaming wind, the stink and grunt of yak herds, in this caravanning path of frozen mud, her hair was braided and oiled with yak butter, her skin the brown of tobacco leaf. She dipped her knees, a sort of curtsy, sheep coat drawn about her, like a shroud, as her palms raised the letter heavenward, fingers splayed toward the winter clouds, like a floral offering to the Buddha. The letter was crumpled, rimmed with finger marks, coffee stains, porridge, the postmark one and a half years old. Cosmo bowed in return. He opened his hands to her upheld hands. He rubbed the envelope between his thumb and fingers, turned it over, then turned it over again, like some New World fabric he'd never seen, as if trying to figure out what this missive had to do with his world of scat and scree.

He backhanded dreadlocks from his eyes, ripped away his Vuarnets. 'My dearest Spezzaferro...' The greeting carried him far past the hooded sherpas and mewling calves, from the last glare of sun before the storm blew in, to fat,

balding Katib pacing around his State Department desk, elbows rising and falling, in some dodo's attempt to fly. He waved about an unlit Macanudo and dictated Cosmo's letter to his secretary: 'Believe it or get out of here, goombah, my people have located Nick...' The herder leaned against a yak's woolly flank. He cupped the leather amulet around his neck in his free hand and recalled the first time he'd met Nick Pines: in the ninth grade, in the boy's room of the junior high school where they both sneaked a smoke. It was 1966, a year of hush puppies and saddle shoes, corduroys and chinos, turtlenecks, Nehru jackets, crew cuts, and side parts, The Supremes singing *My World Is Empty Without You*, Slim Harpo singing *Baby Scratch My Back*. Each boy heard the other light up. Each stood on the toilet seat to peer over the stall. They came face to face above the metal, in the smoke of their butts.

"Hey, Man, where'd you blow in from?" Cosmo belched a smoke ring at the ceiling. "You ain't from the Pitts."

"From the marshes of east Amagansett, courtesy of racketeers," Nick answered. "And just who're you?"

"Cosmo Xavier Francis Spezzaferro—Cos to my friends."

They reached over the divider and shook hands.

"Your first day?"

"Got that right."

"Homeroom—?"

"105."

"Old lady Morrisey?"

"That'd be the name."

"Ballbreaker." Cosmo hissed out smoke. "Follow me, man. I'll slide you in."

And Cosmo remembered as the wind whistled about the parabola of jagged peaks, like breath wheezing through the huge crooked teeth of a monster's jaw, how the redhead trailed him down the middle school's low-ceilinged halls and how he introduced him

to his close friends—Joey Katib, Dave Czyzippian, Francine Giftos. “Folks, this is my new man, Nick Pines. He’s good people. Wonderful etiquette in the john...”

Cosmo flattened his arms on the yak’s back and read the letter through—Joey mentioned the city where Nick lived, what he’d become, an address. Torrents of snow and wind broke through the thunderous sky. Yelling sherpas off-loaded burdens and staked down beasts. Cosmo read the letter a second time in the commotion of the storm then held it up in the purple light and gale. He regarded the flapping paper like some holy kite, an epiphany made real, and smirked at Joey’s history of bulldozing his life back on track, at the letter’s implicit endgame to his five-year long yak life: he wasn’t a local and never would nor want to be. He’d have to continue his search for Nick, that lost and better part of himself, that husky voice which served both as conscience and cusp of exile from himself, an exile he’d long ago pinpointed to a rainy noon at McDonald’s in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1968.

The leader of a bike gang called The Warlocks had insulted him and Cosmo leapt from his booth and pasted a Big Mac across Norman “Little” Majuka’s face. And as he bent now out of the storm into his goat skin tent, its walls luffing about him, like jibs, Cosmo pictured the McDonald’s beige trays, beige counters, and beige tables, those retarded cardboard employee hats, the oil whiff of French fries, and how the bun of his Big Mac was sloppy with cole slaw and cheese as he ground it into the biker’s cheeks and forehead, like Fatty Arbuckle on TV getting pies in the face. Majuka went stiff-elbowed and bug-eyed. The other Warlocks cursed out their startlement. And Cosmo began to guffaw that he’d gone too far yet again. “Yo, Toiletbrain, you’re supposed to eat the burger, not wear it.” That familiar, shivering thrill. That stiletto edge of danger he constantly craved, like driving way way way too fast past the town fuzz or doing it with Donna LaPlante on the ottoman in his parent’s den while his mother sliced brisket in the kitchen. These envelopes of danger he created for himself and his curious competence in them. This root need to cop the world more vividly than anyone else.

He shoved Majuka backwards, heeled left, and jabbed a biker’s gut to buy escape time—the half dozen Warlocks with their chicks

reached for him. His linebacker friend, Dave Czyzippian, butted two bikers' heads with his forehead. They dropped to the floor, like coconuts. Cosmo swiped a man's crutches and tossed one to the blond footballer. "Wedge the door from the outside!" The high school juniors rushed out separate exits. Each jammed a crutch through the door loops. Locked inside, the Warlocks shook their fists. Cosmo flashed Majuka the finger. He strode over to the row of gleaming Harleys and kicked each one down to the asphalt.

The bikers screamed and jumped on the tables, like a pack of ranting baboons.

Cosmo crouched out of the breeze and lit a Marlboro with cupped hands.

Dave followed him past the downed bikes to the black hearse. "Whattya going to tell everyone, Cos?"

"As Doris Day says, Que Sera, Sera, Man."

Dave began to laugh. "We are deep into this one, Man."

The Warlocks rapped the McDonald's windows with their biking boots.

Cosmo keyed on the hearse. "Yessirreee. Norman certainly does look good in ketchup—like a piece of modern art."

"And all that cole slaw hanging from his beard—" Dave laughed louder.

And beautiful Cosmo with his terrific build, Brylcreemed hair, his cheeks splashed with Canoe, gave a whoop and Dave whooped and the friends burned rubber down Dalton Avenue.

Cosmo slowed the hearse at General Electric. He turned right up East Street, past Silver Lake, Imperial Bowling, Kentucky Fried Chicken. They motored up North Street, past banks, churches, pharmacies, England Brothers department store, Besse Clark Suits, to Pittsfield General Hospital.

Cosmo idled near the emergency room and waited for Nick. He drummed the dashboard and crooned along with the radio: *White Rabbit, The Beat Goes On, Mrs. Robinson.*

Dave ran his fingers through his long hair. “May I ask one simple—but strategic—question, Cos?”

“Fire away, big guy.”

“What the hell are we really—really—going to do when the Warlocks find us?”

Cosmo touched Dave’s shoulder and stated, deadpan, “I plan to give Norman a piece of my mind. That young man’s got a nerve.”

The hospital door swung open. Two more high school juniors pushed a pine coffin on a gurney. Nick Pines, lanky and slightly stooped, Ichabod Crane with an ancient broken nose and red afro, steered the coffin from the front. Joey Katib, crew cut, and overweight, heaved it from behind.

Cosmo yanked open the hearse’s tailgate and the friends hefted the coffin to its resting place. Joey and Nick moved to the back seat.

Cosmo pulled into traffic.

Nick cracked his knuckles and started, “The doctors didn’t think the cancer was that bad...”

Dave pried open Budweisers with his teeth.

“The whole thing’s so weird, man...”

Cosmo braked at a red light.

“My old man croaks and I don’t feel anything...”

Joey skated his hand over his scalp bristles. “To think, a racketeer forces you out of your business then marries your wife—”

“And I feel like I should be crying and can’t.” Nick swigged his beer. And this feeling—”

Dave finger-twirled a length of hair.

“—This feeling that I need to belong to something.”

“Like what?” Dave asked.

“Some kind of...something.” Nick shrugged.

“Wow, Man.” Dave picked his nose. “That is beaucoup deep.”

“Pines, you are scaring me with this...ah...pious talk.” Joey peeled the label from his Budweiser.

Cosmo turned onto Eagle Street. “And there she is, sports fans, our very own Francine Giftos, with cigarette and clipboard.”

A girl with black bobbed hair, in jeans and leather jacket, slouched against a green Rambler. She was thin, flat-chested, and bad-complexioned. She cracked gum and smoked a Lark. She spotted the hearse, stood straight, pushed bangs from her eyes. A door swung open and she moved next to Nick on the back seat.

“And if it isn’t Francine Giftos, Pittsfield High’s answer to Sophia Loren—” Joey started.

“Clamp it, Katib, before I tell your kindergarten teacher you’ve gone AWOL.”

Dave toothed open another Budweiser. “What’s cookin’, Francine?”

“What’s cooking—with our collective sick senses of humor—is that I have placed an ad as we discussed in the Berkshire Eagle which puts Mr. Gulch’s house up for sale as a cheap private transaction.”

The boys chuckled.

“And I advertised it so cheap that I bet a hundred people—maybe even two hundred—will show up on Gulch’s doorstep for a house tour. He won’t have a clue.”

The boys broke into a laugh.

“You gotta love it.” Frankie cracked her gum.

Dave reached over and patted her head.

“I’m not your beagle, Czyzippian.”

“Just digging you, Frankie.”

“Dig Nick instead. His father just died.” The girl put her arm around Nick and squeezed him close.

“And don’t I love you, Francine?” Joey asked.

“You’ve got zits and an ROTC haircut, Joey.”

Joey said, “Come on, Giftos, admit it, you look at me and think: Rock Hudson.”

Frankie said, “Joey, your haircut reminds me of last summer when my cousin Alvin Pendergast took me to the African Methodist Church on Riverside Drive to hear Reverend Gary Davis play the blues.” She circled her cigarette and spoke. “You gotta understand, Alvin’s this wild guy with a big ‘fro, bigger than Nick’s. And he loved his hair so much he wore a wig to Fort Bragg basic training so they wouldn’t shave it off. You got this guy? He gets a psychological exemption from the army for talking too much. They simply can’t shut the guy up: the only recruit in the history of Fort Bragg who gets kicked out for incessant talking to a Quonset hut. And so he takes me to this Church to hear the Reverend play the blues. You dig, the Reverend is this old, blind black guy with a white-felt fedora, white shirt, shiny brown tie, worn-out guitar, and worn-out voice—no glamour. And the music’s just alright, but Alvin’s really getting off on the man. So, after the concert, someone asks is there anyone going to Brooklyn who can take the Reverend home and Alvin volunteers. And as we’re driving this blind black guy back to Brooklyn, Alvin says, “Reverend, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure you can.” Frankie imitated a black accent.

“Reverend, what’s it all about?”

“What do you mean, what’s it all about?”

“You know, It. What’s It all about?”

“Boy, what are you talking about?”

“It, Reverend, It.’

“What’s ‘It’, boy?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, Reverend.’

“Are you making fun of me, whitey?’

“No sir. I just want to know—’

“Yeah, yeah. You want to know what IT is.”

“Exactly, Reverend.’

“Boy, you is cracked.’

“And Alvin won’t let the guy alone, all the way to Brooklyn. ‘Talk to me, Reverend. Tell me what It’s all about, Reverend.’ Like the Reverend knows the secrets of the universe—”

Cosmo steered the hearse down Glory Drive, the last street of the last street in Pittsfield. He turned up an old logging road, toward Jonas the Hermit’s homestead. The hearse swayed and bounced as Cosmo shoved in an eight-track of the Doors’ *Light My Fire*. A lightening storm cracked alive. The car windows fogged from the friends’ breath and smoke from the Marlboros and joints they choked in and blew out harshly, as if to expel the conflicts that were in them. Lightening seared the rain-dark woods the electric yellow of a prophet’s warning, if such words could be seen, and Cosmo cursed softly at each rock-and-root jolt to the hearse’s suspension. His undertaker dad, Lou, would complain about any scratches and dents, and he hummed and bobbed his head to Ray Manzarek’s organ solo as the great sedan swayed up the hermit’s muddy driveway and rain poured down and ran in pebble-ridden streams, as if rushing to its final end.

Cosmo braked the mudded hearse in a clearing with a rough-hewn cabin, fenced garden, cow barn, and switched off the ignition. The friends smoked as the rain poured down.

“Let’s get on with it,” Dave finally said.

Hearse doors swung open. The friends leaned into the wind. Cosmo unlatched the tailgate, handed out five shovels.

Nick led them to a far corner of the garden: goldenrod, oak boughs, the panorama of misted hills. “I was thinking here.”

Cosmo slicked back his hair. “Why the bejesus not?”

The friends began to dig in the warm air and rain. Lightening flared. Thunder boomed. *Light My Fire* blared from the hearse. The grave squared and deepened. The boys flung away their shirts, their skin the pale white of sails.

Guitar and organ music filled the fogged clearing, eerie as Hitchcock’s gulls. Frankie began to dance alone in the rain, slow twirling spins that seemed past every care, as if she’d reached the end of all things. She sang out Whitman as the boys shoveled the heavy loam, until they were waist-deep, then shoulder-deep.

“ ‘But O heart! heart! heart!

O the bleeding drops of red,

Where on the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.’ ”

The friends hoisted the coffin and hefted it across the clearing. They wedged the pine box into the pit. They shoveled on dirt and piled on rocks against raccoons. They stood bare-chested in early afternoon in the music, rain, and forest smells, their pants sopping and brown.

Frankie prodded Nick, “Say something.”

Nick straightened and cleared his throat. He watched the grave, as if for signs of life.

Frankie nudged his elbow once more: “Talk.”

“My father was a good man,” Nick began. “He lived a hard life.”

“But what was his life?” Frankie twirled her hands in emphasis.

Nick watched his shoes and considered this.

“Nicky—” she said.

“The truth is, my father never found himself,” Nick admitted.

Cosmo paddled his shovel from hand to hand.

“He never got beyond the hurt from my mother.”

Dave kicked the grave dirt.

“And, you know—you must—that I don’t ever want to end up like this.”

Frankie moved close and draped an arm around his back.

Joey and Dave slouched against each other, head to shoulder, like soldiers after a firefight.

Cats screeched. A cow lowed. There was rain, music, and thunder, a coyote’s trilling bark.

Head lowered, hands stuffed into her jacket pockets, Frankie wandered toward the hearse. The friends trailed her slowly, shovels dragging, like a platoon with casualties. Bare-chested Nick, his red hair its own fire in the dim clearing, stayed on by the grave. He inspected the rough-hewn cabin and tool shed, the garden which lay fallow this year because of Jonas’ lymphoma, wind-bent tree tops, arcs of Berkshire hills, mountaintop shades of grey and green. He reached into his jeans and tossed away the hospital name tag he’d torn from his father’s bony wrist two nights previous when Jonas wheezed, choked, and died. He’d puzzled at his father’s coughing urge to speak then, these last unarticulated despairs, hopes, and cares—what could this lonely man’s final words have been?—and wondered why he’d taken the bracelet at all. Jonas would have disapproved of such nostalgia, would have angered out, “Nicholas, do not gush!” And, yet, who could blame his father’s and by association his own abiding mistrust of all warm emotions after his marriage to Nick’s shrill mother, Jackie, “a violation of every decency and I’m not funning you, kid,” which ratcheted him from his Westchester advertising agency to his Job-reading hill retreat.

Rain slapped the sagging pines, garden, sawmill, his fight-broken nose. Thunder crashed, like stock cars. Lightning sizzled earthwards, jagged as a Czech accent.

Cosmo leaned on the horn. “Yo, Man, we is outta here!”

Nick let the shrill honk turn him from the grave. He shuffled toward the hearse, shoulders hunched, like a count journeying home from a crusade only to be turned away, maligned and unrecognized, from his own door. Past the crypted rocks, garden, weedy yard, press of trees, Nick ducked into the hearse's back door.

Cosmo handed him a lit Marlboro. Dave passed over a second Bud. Nick took a long hit from Frankie's joint as Cosmo backed down the hermit's drive.

The hearse inched through the mud and over tree roots, past rows of pine that lined their path. Dave switched off the Doors and turned on the radio. He chased songs from channel to channel—*Do you Know the Way to San Jose, Sittin' On the Dock of the Bay, Baby I Need Your Lovin'*. He snapped his fingers and sang falsetto.

Frankie puffed on a Lark. Silently, she wished for a boyfriend and wished that boyfriend was Nick. He was odd-looking with that big red Afro, his height and slight stoop, yet was brave as Cosmo and Dave and smarter than them all. With his trove of Neruda quotes— 'Why wasn't Christopher Columbus able to discover Spain?' 'Where does a blind man live who is pursued by bees?'—alloyed to his New York brashness, hermit insularity, his amalgam of skeptic and seeker, his outbursts, meditations, his genuine human warmth—all of it seemed aimed to get behind the masks and conundrums of things. For despite Cosmo and Dave being far hipper, Joey more ambitious, and she the most academic of all, Nick possessed a greater depth than the rest of them. She called it a deeper heart of care, which is why he became the soul of their friendship and force they could rally around, the locus which gave them the sense and confidence they were destined for greater things.

Cosmo three-pointed the filthy hearse at the bottom of the hermit's drive. He edged them past the tiny reservoir, onto the logging road.

Nick crossed his legs and gazed at the slope of hills, tearless in this reverie of loss.

He pictured his father's bald pate and red hair puffed clown-like to each side. He pictured him at the beaver pond in August, the

cirrus clouds, humid air, the gnats, how they swam in the chilly pond then dried in the sun, picked blueberries, read crime novels, snacked on jerky—

Cosmo hooted in relief as the hearse climbed onto asphalt. “Dirty but not dented. Old Lou ain’t got nothing on me—yet.”

Joey barked, “I don’t get it, Spezzaferro. If your old man’s so worried about the hearse, why does he let a greasehead like you take it at all?”

“The truth is, man, he don’t trust me with it. But he wants me in his funeral home business.”

“But, you don’t want the business—” Joey argued.

“And you don’t even want to go to college,” Dave said.

Frankie asked, “So, what are you going to do with yourself, Cos?”

“What do you guys think about the Army?” Cosmo was driving past a neighborhood of pastel-colored houses, Marlboro dangling, James Dean-like, from his lips.

Frankie pushed her bangs from her eyes. “Those losers?”

Cosmo yelled out, “Hey, I just enlisted, people!”

“You screwup!” Dave howled.

Nick whipped his head around. “You’re joking, right?”

“Hey, baby, I’m off to boot camp in a month!”

Joey slapped his own forehead. “The guy’s hallucinating.”

“Listen, fellas—” Cosmo began.

Joey said, “I thought the Army didn’t take anyone whose IQ didn’t match their shoe size, Spezzaferro.”

“No one ever accused the Army of being rocket scientists, OK, Joey? But there can’t just be helium up there, neither.” Cosmo sped the bare-chested boys and girl up Washington Mountain.

And Nick recalled tagging along with loud Joey to a marriage dinner where the Lebanese Muslims of the family sat on one side of

the restaurant and the Lebanese Christians on the other. He remembered the good food, noisy talk, and hand-waving, but also their divisiveness which seemed bred into Joey.

Cosmo ranted, "You hosers got to appreciate the crap a respectable human's got to take around here: parents who ground you if you get mud on car fenders, assface cops, faggot teachers, chicks who don't put out—"

Joey pointed at the road. "Would you look where you're going, please, Spezzaferro? And put your hands on the wheel?"

"I want to see different countries before I settle down," Cosmo explained. "I want to stop the spread of Communism—"

"I didn't realize that you were so noble, Cos." Frankie made a face.

Dave said, "The only thing that makes Cosmo noble is lifting Donna LaPlante's skirt."

Cosmo braked the hearse at a crossroads. Suddenly, a string of gleaming Harleys zipped around the curve.

"Hey, look at that, it's the Warlocks." Joey strained forward in his seat.

Dave jabbed his window. "Quick, Cos, the other way—"

"What do you care if they see us, Czyzippian?" Joey asked.

"Dear Jesus, I hope they didn't." Dave watched the bikers disappear past a break of trees.

Joey demanded, "What's going on?"

"Tell them, Dave."

"You tell them, Cos."

"You'll tell it better than me, Dave."

"Okie-dokie." Dave faced the friends in the back seat. "Um, ah, folks, they're after us."

Frankie paused in her smoking. "What's that supposed to mean?"

“That depends on how you look at it,” Dave answered.

“How do the Warlocks look at it?” Joey asked.

“Well, Cosmo and I think they look at it all screwed up.”

“And, pray tell, how do the Warlocks have it all screwed up?”
Joey peeled the label off his Budweiser.

“Well, it started like this: Majuka insulted Cosmo—”

Joey tore the label into pieces. “And Cosmo did what exactly?”

“Well, then, Cosmo rammed a Big Mac into Majuka’s face.”

“Cosmo rammed a Big Mac—?” Joey dropped the pieces.

“Cole slaw and ketchup everywhere—the man’s face looked like Dracula makeup.” Dave grinned.

Joey smacked the front seat twice. “Are you guys out of your effing minds!?”

Cosmo accelerated up the mountain. Windshield wipers squeaked. “Tell them the rest, Dave.”

“What ‘rest?’” Joey exclaimed. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Cosmo kicked down their Harleys.”

“Kicked down their—!?” Joey clutched his stomach.

“Then gave them the finger.”

“You’re asking me to believe this?”

Frankie whistled. Nick whistled.

“You sicko, Spezzaferro!” Joey shouted.

Cosmo said, “Majuka called me Donna LaPlante’s slut.”

Frankie laughed a deep throaty rumble.

Nick smirked then said, “Rude, but true.”

“But at McDonald’s, in front of everyone,” Cosmo said.

“And for that—?” Joey swallowed rapidly.

Cosmo screamed, "I ain't noone's slut, Katib!"

"Great. Beautiful." Joey massaged his temples. "You guys got a rumble on your hands. But Frankie and I are dead meat."

Cosmo slowed the car by a forest path. "We're going swimming. I'm sick of this crap." He parked the hearse beneath an elm overhang. The friends piled out of the car. As they hiked toward the quarry, the drizzle slowed, pigeon-gray clouds raced overhead. Fog pooled in the stands of trees.

"Yo, Spezzaferro, why didn't you tell us about the Army?" Dave called. "We ain't your friends no more?"

"I told Donna."

"And did she cry boohoo?" Frankie minced.

Cosmo beamed. "It was worth signing up just for that."

"And you told Lou?" Dave tore a leaf from a tree.

"Tonight, after a few brews," Cosmo said. "He don't jab so fast then."

The trail opened to the granite lip of an oval pond. A rock cliff, the grey of elephant, ears rose one hundred feet at its southern end. Frankie mentioned the legend of the high school boy who leaped from the quarry peak, dashed his head on submerged rock, then sank unrecovered into the dark water below. But there were lower stations on the cliff where the friends climbed and sat, drank more Buds, smoked more pot. They heaved firecrackers into the woods. They stripped to their underwear while Frankie stayed dressed in jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers. She watched the boys shout, tease, pretend leaps from pirate planks to their deaths in the cold water, arms folded across their chests, like ancient mariners who delivered themselves up to God. Shivering on the cliff afterwards, arms hugged to knees, the friends bantered about Viet Nam, Army, college entrance exams, dating, Jonas, the vast merits of Donna LaPlante. They relived the time they tore apart and rewelded despised teacher Tony Murgo's Volkswagen Bug in his living room.

Then came the gun of motorcycles which roared like a passing jet, whooshed loud, then died.

“Shhhhh.” Frankie kept a finger to her lips.

One long quiet minute. Then came a metal crunching bang, then another, and another. Then the shattering of glass, and more glass, and more glass after that.

“For Chrissakes, the hearse!” Cosmo exclaimed.

Joey went bug-eyed. “It’s the Warlocks!”

“Dear Jesus, the hearse. Lou’ll crucify me!” Cosmo slumped to the cliff face. His shoulders curved forward, chin to chest.

Dave shook Cosmo’s shoulder. “Cos, Cos.”

The banging and shattering continued.

A second quiet minute. Then voices in the woods.

“They’re coming!” Joey choked out.

A dozen potbellied men and their bleach-blonde girlfriends hefted picnic coolers onto the quarry lip. The men sported ragged beards, torn jeans, sleeveless jean jackets with skull insignias. The women wore sleeveless jean shirts.

Cosmo sulked with his head down.

“Come on, Spezzaferro. Buck up.” Joey prodded his shoulder.

Majuka called across the water, “Hey, is that Donna LaPlante’s slut I see over there in his underpants? Or, maybe they’re her underpants.” And he sniggered, hoarse and nasty.

Cosmo glanced up at Majuka then back at his rock.

“Cat got your tongue, Wop Head?”

“Cos, Cos.” Dave prodded his other shoulder. “Get a grip.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to hitchhike home tonight, Spezzaferro. Seems your hearse got a few flats.”

The Warlocks and their women snickered as they tossed beers to each other. Majuka waddled to the quarry lip. Black matted hair reached his shoulders. His vast belly spilled out of his jean jacket. “Great weather for a rumble, eh, boys?”

Cosmo scratched the cliff with his pinky nail.

“And the only way out of here, Wop Head, is through me.”

A bitter wind wafted the smell of dead leaves. Three large black crows winged across the pond.

Which is when Nick called out, “Hey, Norman.”

“Who called me that?”

“Right here, Norman.”

“Who’s that?”

“Pines.”

“The Jewboy?”

“You and me, Norman—”

“Don’t call me that, Goofball.”

“What would do it for you, Norman—?”

“Torturing Spezzaferro and pistol-whipping the rest of you scum—that would do it for me.”

“But, you just got out of jail, Norman—”

“Don’t call me that!”

“And you’ll go right back—”

“I don’t give a good—”

“What do you need it for?”

“The Man smeared me with a Big Mac—”

“He’s a jerk.” The friends watched Nick.

“And kicked down our motorcycles.”

“A stupid jerk.”

“And gave us the finger.”

“A stupid, disrespectful jerk.”

“I need my revenge, Jewboy.”

“You smashed the hearse.”

“It’s Spezzaferro’s turn—”

“You’re on parole, Norman.”

“That wop made me look bad in front of my friends.”

“He’s a bastard.” Nick pointed a finger at slumped Cosmo.

“I hate that guy.”

“You’ve got the right.”

“I need my revenge, kike boy.”

“What’s going to do it for you, Norman?”

“Don’t call me that!”

“What’ll it take?” Nick asked, once more.

Majuka consulted his biker friends. “Let Spezzaferro jump off that cliff. He’ll die and I won’t go to jail.”

Nick glanced at Cosmo. “You willing to jump, Cos?”

Cosmo kept scratching the rock, as if he hoped to tunnel out of there.

“Damn you, Spezzaferro!” Joey wagged a finger at him. “If you don’t jump, these Warlocks will murder us.”

Cosmo tossed a pebble into the water, then another.

Majuka called, “What’s it going to be, Pines? Rumble or jump?”

“Spezzaferro isn’t jumping—”

“Like the jerko has a choice—”

“I say fight—” Dave started.

Majuka shouted, “What’s it going to be, turdballs?”

Nick yelled back, “I’m jumping instead.”

Cosmo looked up.

“Say again, Jewboy?”

“I’m jumping instead.”

Frankie grabbed Nick’s arm. “Don’t do it, Nicky—”

“You gonna study your way out of this one, Francine?”

The girl glared at the Warlocks.

Majuka’s voice carried across the pond, “Go ahead, baby. Jump and die.”

Nick laced on his sneakers slowly, like this was the championship game. Rock by rock, the friends and Warlocks watched him scale the cliff. On its narrow peak, his red hair and white skin glistened in the sunlight. Dave urged him one last time to come down. Everyone shielded their eyes with their hands. Nick inspected the water distant beneath him. The Warlocks began to chant, “Jump! Jump! Jump! Jump!” The hermit’s son stepped to the precipice, stately, unhurried, as if accepting judgment for his sins. Adrenaline coursed through him in electric jolts. The toes of his sneakers touched the cliff edge. He smelled the damp forest, scanned the clouds and quilt of trees. Sparrows circled him in zooming halos. Trucks wheezed up the mountain road. He pictured Jonas in his hospital bed then, eyes bugged in pain, like some zombie from an unremembered tomb. Which is when Nick jammed his fingers in his ears and closed his eyes to escape his father’s death rattles, Warlock bullying—what felt like the loss of the Kingdom to Come—and leaped high and out, as far as he possibly could. And for one moment, he soared like a hawk, a myth, a rising soul, until gravity tugged him down the grey granite cliff face toward the deep, cold black water below.

