



Where It Hurts (A Gus Murphy Novel)

By Reed Farrel Coleman



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Nominated for the 2017 Edgar Award for Best Novel

From the critically acclaimed and award-winning author comes a gritty, atmospheric new series about the *other* side of Long Island, far from the wealth of the Hamptons, where real people live—and die.

Gus Murphy thought he had the world all figured out. A retired Suffolk County cop, Gus had everything a man could want: a great marriage, two kids, a nice house, and the rest of his life ahead of him. But when tragedy strikes, his life is thrown into complete disarray. In the course of a single deadly moment, his family is blown apart and he is transformed from a man who believes he understands everything into a man who understands nothing.

Divorced and working as a courtesy van driver for the run-down hotel in which he has a room, Gus has settled into a mindless, soulless routine that barely keeps his grief at arm's length. But Gus's comfortable waking trance comes to an end when ex-con Tommy Delcamino asks him for help. Four months earlier, Tommy's son T.J.'s battered body was discovered in a wooded lot, yet the Suffolk County PD doesn't seem interested in pursuing the killers. In desperation, Tommy seeks out the only cop he ever trusted—Gus Murphy.

Gus reluctantly agrees to see what he can uncover. As he begins to sweep away the layers of dust that have collected over the case during the intervening months, Gus finds that Tommy was telling the truth. It seems that everyone involved with the late T.J. Delcamino—from his best friend, to a gang enforcer, to a mafia capo, and even the police—has something to hide, and all are willing to go to extreme lengths to keep it hidden. It's a dangerous favor Gus has taken on as he claws his way back to take a place among the living, while searching through the sewers for a killer.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Reed Farrel Coleman introduces a great new character, Gus Murphy, a street savvy ex-cop who operates beneath the glitter of the Gold Coast and the glitz of the Hamptons in a Long Island that few outsiders ever see. *Where It Hurts* is a gut punch of a novel, a murder mystery layered with grief, greed, and grit. Coleman is as good as Chandler, Hammett or Ed McBain." --Nelson DeMille

"One of the greatest voices in contemporary crime fiction, and one of the best storytellers too. I loved this book. Nobody does it better." --Lee Child

"Gus Murphy is the new name in crime fiction. He is my kind of guy and *Where It Hurts*, Reed Farrel Coleman's spectacularly absorbing new novel, is my kind of story. You go into a story like this expecting/hoping for a solid character to ride with, a high-octane story in which you don't see the turns coming in the road ahead, and a truthful observation on life from a different angle. As usual, Coleman delivers. I can't wait for Murphy and Coleman to show up again." --Michael Connelly

"The author of the 'Moe Prager' series has created another engaging sleuth in the down-but-not-out Gus . . . The ancillary characters, both good and bad, are also a fascinating mix. Moe Prager fans will hail this new series, as will lovers of solid mysteries, especially those set on Long Island." --*Library Journal* (starred)

"Modern noir at its absolute best! Reading *Where It Hurts* is to bask in the joy of the heyday of private eye fiction - Chandler, Hammett, Cain and the whole crew. Everything's a delight, from the speedy and clever plot, to the firecracker snap of the dialog, to the heart-wrenching portrayal of the characters - good and bad. And Gus Murphy, what a protagonist! Coleman's truly delivered, and then some."--Jeffery Deaver

"*Where It Hurts* is a thrilling start to a new series by Reed Farrel Coleman - who writes some of the best crime fiction around. Tough prose, taut plotting, and a great new protagonist named Gus Murphy. Coleman's got a winner here." --Linda Fairstein

"Reed Farrel Coleman's *Where It Hurts* tells a riveting story about a Long Island that has nothing to do with the romantic vision of F. Scott Fitzgerald in this action packed tale of an amoral world. Coleman is a born storyteller who writes with great authority and gives as much bang for the buck as the best books in the genre." --Pat Conroy, author of *South of Broad* and *Beach Music*

"*Where It Hurts* ushers us into a vivid and rueful new world with a striking and haunted hero for whom we fall hard. With his signature hard-bitten lyricism but with an urgency and darkness all its own, Reed Farrel Coleman has given us a riveting new series we'll want to live with for a very, very long time." --Megan Abbot, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dare Me* and *The Fever*

"*Where It Hurts* is taut, smart, and engaging with a terrific sense of place. Readers will never go wrong with Gus Murphy or his creator Reed Farrel Coleman." --C.J. Box, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Endangered*

About the Author

Reed Farrel Coleman is the author of novels, short stories, and poetry. He is a three-time Edgar Award nominee in three different categories: Best Novel, Best Paperback Original, and Best Short Story. He is also

a three-time recipient of the Shamus Award for Best PI Novel of the Year and has won the Audie, Macavity, Barry, and Anthony Awards. A former executive vice president of Mystery Writers of America, Reed is an adjunct instructor of English at Hofstra University and a founding member of MWA University. Brooklyn born and raised, he now lives with his family in Suffolk County on Long Island.

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One

(Monday Night)

Some people swallow their grief. Some let it swallow them. I guess there's about a thousand degrees in between those extremes. Maybe a million. Maybe a million million. Who the fuck knows? Not me. I don't. I'm just about able to put one foot before the other, to breathe again. But not always, not even most of the time. Annie, my wife, I mean, my ex-wife, she let it swallow her whole and when it spit her back up, she was someone else, something else: a hornet from a butterfly. If I was on the outside looking in and not the central target of her fury and sting, I might understand it. I might forgive it. I tell myself I would. But I'd have to forgive myself first. I might as well wish for Jesus to reveal himself in my side view mirror or for John Jr. to come back to us. At the moment, my wishes were less ambitious ones. I wished for the 11:38 to Ronkonkoma to be on time. I should have wished for it to be early.

I checked the dashboard clock as I pulled into the hotel courtesy van parking spot out in front of the Dunkin Donuts shop at the station. *11:30, eight minutes to spare.* But spare time was empty time and I had come to dread it because empty was pretty much all I was anymore. Two years steeped in emptiness and I still didn't know how to fill it up. My shrink, Dr. Rosen, says not to try, that I should let myself fully experience the void. That if I don't give myself permission to feel the depth of the abyss, the slipperiness of its walls, I'll never climb out. The thing is, you have to want to climb out, don't you? Even a spare minute was chance enough to relive the last two years. Took forever to live it. Takes only seconds to live it again. I had tried filling in the fissures, cracks, and cavities with wondering, wondering about the trick of time. That got me about as far as wishing. Nowhere.

I stepped out of the van into the chill night. My breath turned to heaving clouds of smoke as cold as God's love. *Hail Mary, full of shit, the Lord is with thee, not me.* I didn't really want coffee. No man who lives for sleep as I do wants coffee. But I had to sustain my waking trance until six AM. Then I could turn the van keys over to Fredo and fall into my cool sheet and quilt-covered solace. When I was on the job, it was different. Everything was different. I liked the world then and the people in it. Liked the buzz of caffeine. Yeah, that was me once, the cop in a donut shop, reinforcing stereotypes. Now I was just occupying my mind, doing something, anything not to sit in the van marking time.

Aziza, the mocha-skinned Pakistani girl behind the counter, nodded at me. Smiled a gap-toothed smile. She no longer asked what I wanted. *Small coffee. Half and Half. Two Sweet'n Lows.* She made it up for me. Put it on the counter. She no longer gave me the change when I paid. She dropped the change in the paper tip cup with the other careless pennies, quarters, dimes, and nickels. I liked Aziza because she expected nothing of me beyond our routine. We danced our nightly dance and then went back to being strangers. She didn't expect me to put the pain behind me or to bravely get on with my life.

Khalid, the night manager, a fleshy man with shark eyes and a suspicious face, stared at me as he always did. It was as if he could smell the taint on me. He didn't like me in the shop. Thought I might sully the place with my taint or maybe that wasn't it at all.

I got back to the van as the 11:38 pulled into Ronkonkoma. In the eight minutes that had passed, the usual crowd had descended upon the station. Parents in double-parked SUVs, waiting to pick up their kids. Bored-looking husbands unhappy at being dragged off their sofas into the cold night because their wives felt like doing Broadway with the girls. Cabbies outside their cars, their flannel-shirted bellies flopping over their beltlines, smoking cigarettes, talking shit to each other. I placed the coffee inside the van and took out my Paragon Hotel placard on which the words Westex Technical were written in black marker.

I was scheduled to pick up a party of three from Westex and bring them back to the Paragon. The Paragon Hotel of Bohemia, New York was paragon of nothing so much as proximity, proximity to Long Island MacArthur Airport. And MacArthur Airport, an airport of three airlines, was nothing so much as an unfulfilled promise, the little airport that couldn't. The Paragon was a way station, a place to pass through on the way to or from the airport. There was the occasional foreign tourist who'd fixated on the room rate instead of the distance to New York City or had neglected to convert kilometers into miles.

The three Westex guys were what I expected, what most of my passengers were: tired, hungry, distracted. When I got back into the van after loading their bags into the rear, all of them were busy with their phones or tablets. They kind of grunted to themselves and one another. I was glad of that, happy to be ignored. I had trouble with the chatty ones, the ones who wanted to be your pal. When I was on the job I understood nervous chatter because the uniform made people nervous. I also had empathy for the compulsively polite. Not anymore. Who in their heart of hearts really wanted to be the van driver's buddy? It was all so much bullshit, a way to pass time from point to point. I was in on the lie of passing time, so I never spoke first. Never asked where anyone was from. Never asked if they had enjoyed the city. Never asked what they did for a living, or about their families. Never asked where they were headed. I knew where they were headed. We were all headed there, eventually.

I put the van in drive, looked in my side view for oncoming cars or the second coming. And not seeing either, I pulled the wheel hard left and made a sweeping U-turn west onto Railroad Avenue. As we went I sipped at my unwanted coffee, thinking of my dead son.

Two

(Tuesday Morning)

The phone bleating on the nightstand woke me from a dreamless sleep, but John Jr. was my first waking thought just as he had been my last conscious thought before I closed my eyes. It was as reflexive to me as blinking. After two years grieving him, missing him, tearing my guts out over his death, he never really left me. At least he was no longer every thought in between my first and last. There had been periods during that first year when I felt I would choke on his constant presence. When I would have given almost anything for a few minutes of simple forgetfulness. It got so oppressive that I began hating the son I had loved more than myself and then hated myself for hating him.

The TV was still on but tuned to SportsCenter, so it could have been any time of the day or night. I looked out the southeast facing window of my room and saw the sun was relatively low in the sky. I felt the weariness still deep in my bones and knew I hadn't been asleep very long.

I reached for the phone.

“Yeah, what?”

Nothing.

I dozed off with the phone still in my hand. This time when it rang, I managed to press the talk button.

“Yeah.”

“Gus, there’s a gentleman down here asking to see you.” It was Felix at the front desk, his Filipino lilt less prominent when he was speaking in front of a guest.

“What time is it?” I asked even as I stretched to see the clock radio.

“Nine seventeen.”

I yawned. “This gentleman have a name?”

“He won’t give me his name, but he says you have dealt with him in the past.”

“That really narrows it down. What’s he look like?”

Felix cleared his throat and, without a hint of guile, whispered. “Trouble.”

I laughed, felt the smile on my face. It didn’t used to feel so foreign. “Tell him I’m sleeping.”

“Don’t you think I have attempted that, Gus? He said he will wait down here all day if that is

what it will take.” Then Felix was whispering again. “He’s a rough looking man with tattoos and he makes me nervous.”

“All right. Tell him to go wait for me in the coffee shop and I’ll be along.”

“When?”

“When I get there.”

“Thank you, Gus.”

For my part, I was in no rush to get downstairs, but I liked Felix. He didn’t have much of a heart for confrontation. On the other hand, I had spent most of my adult life collecting scar tissue from it. It’s what cops did.

I brushed my teeth, finger combed my grief-gray hair—that’s what my sister called it—and pulled on my Costco wardrobe: Kirkland jeans, black Tommy Hilfiger sweater, Kirkland athletic socks, and running shoes. My Glock, and ammo were the only pieces of my outfit that I hadn’t bought at Costco. Even the black leather jacket I wore had come from there.

It was a five step stroll to the elevator from my room. The room was part of my deal with the Bonackers, the family that owned and managed the Paragon. I drove the van from six to six three or four nights a week and occasionally acted as house detective. Although the hotel was half-empty most of the time, the Full Flaps Lounge did big happy hour business because of its proximity to a large industrial park and

office buildings. And when it was turned into a 70s and 80s throwback disco on Friday and Saturday evenings, things sometimes got a little hairy. Middle-aged men flexing their weekend beer muscles for drunk divorcees could get ugly, and often did. The Bonackers liked knowing that when I called the cops, they came, and fast.

The lobby of the Paragon was actually a pretty grand sight if you didn't look too closely, and if your taste ran to despair. Completed in the mid-80s, the hotel had gone through several incarnations. The last time any serious work had been done on the place was prior to the 2008 financial collapse. It took more body blows after JetBlue declined to set up shop at MacArthur and Southwest began shifting flights to LaGuardia. The Paragon had already changed hands four or five times when the Bonackers bought it. The rooms were cheap, clean, and available. If that wasn't enough for you, you were shit out of luck.

I nodded at Felix as I came off the elevator. He pointed his short little arm at the hotel coffee shop, poking the air with his finger. "Big man, Gus. Very big."

"I hope you take this the right way, Felix, but—"

"Don't you talk about my height again. I am the same size as Manny Pacquiao."

I took a boxer's stance and threw a shadow jab. "Too bad you don't punch like him."

"There is going to be trouble, do you think?"

"I guess we're gonna find out."

I walked into the Runway coffee shop, the walls of which were covered in murals of great moments in aviation history connected to Long Island. Lindbergh taking off from Roosevelt Field for his flight to Le Bourget. The Grumman-built moon lander touching down in the Sea of Tranquility. The first A-10 rolling off the Fairchild Republic production line. A swept-wing Grumman F-14 swooping low over an airshow crowd at Jones Beach. For the second time in twenty minutes I laughed. I laughed because there would be no more such great moments. Roosevelt Field was now an enormous shopping mall. Fairchild Republic was gone and Grumman, once the largest employer on Long Island, had been dismembered and swallowed up, existing now only as a feeble outpost in a sea of abandonment. I knew a little something about that.

The coffee shop was nearly empty but for the ghostly scent of fried bacon and dark grace notes of burnt black coffee. Along with the smells of breakfast, the big man was the only other thing in the place. He sat at a booth, a cup of coffee before him on the wingtip-shaped table. I didn't approach him. He looked like somebody I knew, but I couldn't quite place him. When I was on the job I'd had a steel trap memory, but the last two years had taken their toll. Not much was crisp or clear to me any longer. Vague familiarity was my default setting. Even the pain of John Jr.'s loss had transformed itself from the excruciating burn of a puncture wound to the dull ache of a dying tooth. There was also something in the big man's expression that reminded me of my own reflection. A distance in his moist brown eyes, a disconnection from the moment. It's hard to explain, but it was there as sure as the cup in front of him.

I was frozen in place, pinned by the resonance in the big man's expression. That was when somebody in the kitchen dumped a load of silverware onto the sorting tray. The crash and jangle of the metal utensils broke the silence. The big man's eyes refocused. He turned to look up at me, a mournful smile on his crooked mouth. Yeah, I knew him: Thomas Delcamino, Tommy D. Everybody who had worked in the Second Precinct knew Tommy D. Most of us had arrested him. Many of us, more than once.

Three

(Tuesday Morning)

He stood to greet me, the sadness in his bent smile seeming to vanish. As he rose, I patted my jacket pocket to feel for my weapon. He noticed. I guess I'd wanted him to notice. On the job you hear lots of revenge tales about humps you busted coming around to pay you back, but it turns out that only a very few of those stories had any truth in them. They were meant to keep you alert and to remind you not to be too much of an asshole to the handcuffed people riding in the back of the car. A lot of guys I worked with over the years needed to hear those stories more than I did. Funny how the ones who needed to hear them never listened. When Tommy D. saw me pat my hip, the wind went out of him, the sadness returning to his expression as he shook his head at me in disappointment. Disappointing people, I did a lot of that these days.

Tommy D. looked scary enough, if he wasn't exactly the behemoth Felix had hinted at. Maybe six three at most, not a whole lot taller than me. Felix hadn't exaggerated about the tats. He'd gotten that much right. Delcamino was inked up pretty good. His hands were blue, green, and red with tattoos, many of which seemed to be continuations of designs hidden by the sleeves of his tan, dust covered Carhartt jacket. But it must have been the barbed wire tat that swirled around his neck and the streaks of red-inked blood leaking out of where the prongs appeared to cut into the skin of his throat that had freaked Felix out.

Delcamino held out his big right hand. "Officer Murphy," he said. "You don't need to carry. You got nothin' to worry about from me. You always treated me with respect. More than a dildo like me deserved."

I shook his hand without much enthusiasm. He may not have been much taller than me, but he *was* bigger, broader, and thicker through the chest and limbs. His hand dwarfed mine. The skin of his palm and fingers was rough and calloused.

"You behaving yourself these days, Tommy?" The words came out of my mouth by reflex. As if it mattered. As if I cared.

He lit up. "Yeah, yeah. I got a job as a laborer with a company that does masonry and paving over on Long Island Avenue in Holtsville. I live in a trailer over there, too. Watch the yard, work on the trucks. It's hard work, you know, but it pays good."

Tommy looked fierce, but he wasn't. It was a Technicolor feint, a lion's roar from an alley cat. The Tommy D. I knew would probably have preferred fading into the backdrop. The stuff I'd arrested him for was all petty shit, possession of stolen property, minor drug sales, ripping stereos out of car dashboards

when that still made sense to do, like that. None of that is to say Tommy couldn't take care of himself. If you pushed him hard enough, he'd push back harder.

"I'm glad you got your shit straight, but why are you here, Tommy? How'd you find me?"

He thumped back down in the booth. I kept my feet. I wanted the high ground if it came to that.

Head bowed, he said, "I went to your house like two weeks ago and the woman renting the place told me you didn't live there no more. She said she didn't know where you lived. Nice lady. You know, you should really get your driveway redone. I can get you a real good discount. My boss—"

"How did you know my address?"

He shrugged. "The internet. You can find anybody on the internet."

"And here. How did you find me here? There's nothing on the net about me being here."

"I asked around."

"What the fuck does that mean, you asked around? Who'd you ask? You don't start giving answers I need to hear, I'm gonna—"

He looked up, his eyes rimmed in red. He held up his palms in surrender. "Sorry, Officer Murphy. I didn't mean no harm. I swear."

"I didn't ask for apologies or explanations."

"Just around. Then last Friday night a guy I grew up with was in the dance club here. He was telling me about it and mentioned you was working the door. He recognized you is all. If he didn't say nothing about it to me yesterday, I guess I never woulda found you."

I sat down across from Delcamino. "Okay, that's how you found me. Now tell me why."

Tommy D. looked everywhere but at me. He was struggling with himself, searching for the right words. "It's my kid, my son," he said, his booming voice oddly brittle.

"I didn't know you had kids."

"I don't. I mean, I don't, not no more."

I felt myself burn beneath my skin. "What the fuck, Tommy?"

He reached down beside him and put a faded green canvas backpack on the table. He unzipped it and took out a folded newspaper story. He unfolded it, smoothed it out, and laid it on the table in front of me with a kind of religious reverence. "He was murdered."

I was confused. "Who was?"

"My son, TJ. They murdered him. They put a beatin' on him, fuckin' tortured him. Broke all his fingers, broke his kneecaps. They burned him, too. They tied him up and burned him. Then them motherfuckas dumped him in a lot in Nesconset like a bag a garbage or something."

“Christ,” I heard myself say. I started to cross myself and stopped.

Delcamino couldn't talk. He was crying, his chest heaving so that I could feel it through the table. He wiped his tears and snot on the sleeve of his jacket, leaving a smear of gray cement dust on his cheek.

And in that instant I was under water, back down the hole I had just begun to crawl out of. All I saw in Delcamino's tears was my own rage and grief. It was all I could do not to smack him or cry myself. I sat there watching him, nausea welling up in me in a way it hadn't since the day we buried John Jr.

His tears stopped eventually and his heaving chest calmed, but then he started ranting.

“What the fuck kinda chance did a son a mine ever have with a piece a shit like me for a father?” he asked, not really wanting an answer. “What kinda life was a kid a mine gonna have?”

“Take it easy, Tommy.”

“Take it easy! How the fuck can I take it easy? The cops won't even give me the time a day. I call the detectives and all they say is they're working the case and hang up on me. Look, Officer Mur—I mean, Mr. Murphy, I know I been a fuck up my whole life and that my kid was following right behind me, but that don't mean he was garbage. Don't he deserve some justice, too? Am I wrong? He was a fuck up like me. Sure he boosted some shit to pay for his drugs, but he was trying to get straight. He didn't do nothing so bad that he deserved what he got. He didn't deserve to die like that. Sometimes I can't sleep thinking about how afraid he musta been and how much he musta suffered alone like that. I swear there are nights I wake up hearin' him screamin' for me. I wasn't there to stand up for him when he was alive. I gotta stand up for him now. You can understand that, right?”

I nodded. “When did this happen, Tommy?”

“Last August,” he said, tapping the newspaper article with his index finger. “It's all in here. See, that's him there in the picture.”

“Handsome kid.”

Delcamino smiled, then his lip turned down. “I mean, I been patient. I tried to let the detectives do their thing, you know? I know how this shit works. I know it ain't an easy job, but I gave 'em a list of TJ's asshole friends, the dickheads he used to run with. I got it all written down, what I gave them. I gave 'em copies of pictures, names, addresses, phone numbers.” He patted the backpack. “I even did a little askin' around myself, got the names of the dealers he used to score from. Guys, you know, TJ mighta owed money to.”

“And?”

“And nothing. I went back to some of the people I talked to and they said the detectives never even contacted them. I mean, for fuck's sake, Officer—“

“Gus. Call me Gus.”

“Gus.” He smiled, trying it on for size. I figured it felt like a small victory to him. It sure felt like one to me. It had been a long time since I made someone else smile.

“Why come to me?”

“Because you was always the rightest cop I ever met. You treated me like a person, like a human being.”

“Look, Tommy, there’s channels for this kind of thing, a chain of command, people to talk to.”

“I done that. I talked to them till I’m blue in the face,” he said. “I been up one side of that ladder and down the other. Either they don’t listen or they don’t give a fuck. Who am I, right? I’m a skel, a mutt, a piece a shit. And my kid wasn’t no better. None of ‘em said it, but they didn’t have to. I may be stupid, but I ain’t blind neither. Half of ‘em thought, with TJ dead that was one less headache for them to deal with down the line.”

I wanted to tell him he was wrong, but I didn’t because he wasn’t. Maybe he was a little harsh about it. Harsh was what he understood. I’d been on the other side of it. Any cop who tells you he doesn’t judge some people as better than others is a liar. I did it. We all did. Like the badge and gun, judgments came with the territory. The trick was not treating people differently. The church teaches you that you’re judged for your thoughts *and* deeds, but in the cathedral of the street thoughts count for little. Deeds talk loudest.

I asked, “Have you tried hiring a PI?”

He reached into the backpack came out with a fist size, rubber band-ed roll of twenties. He put it on the table, right on top of the newspaper article. “That’s three large there, give or take. It’s all the money I got in the world.”

“What’s it for?”

“For you, Gus. I went to a few PIs. All they wanna do is suck you dry an hour at a time with no promises of finding nothing. I’d be drained in two, three weeks tops.”

I could feel that burn beneath my skin again. “Who told you about my son?”

Delcamino tilted his head at me like a confused puppy. “Gus, I—“

“What, you think I’ll help you because of what happened to John Jr.?”

He started talking, but I couldn’t hear it. I shot up off the booth cushion, the fire now burning inside me and out. “Get outta here, Tommy D. Take your fucking money and get outta here!” I pounded the table, his coffee cup crashing to the floor, shattering. “I’m sorry about your kid, but don’t you ever dare try to use my son to mess with me again. Understand? You want justice, well, fuck you! There isn’t any. None. Not anywhere in this world. Now get outta here! Get outta here!”

When I calmed down, Tommy Delcamino was nowhere to be found. Felix, hand on my forearm, was standing next to me. He was peering up at me, his nearly black eyes filled with an odd cocktail of fear and admiration. Paolo, the dishwasher and busboy, was sweeping the broken shards of the coffee cup into a plastic dustpan. When I looked back at the table, I saw that the money and backpack were gone, but the newspaper article was still there.

Four

(Wednesday Early Morning)

I sat in the driver's seat, a howling wind buffeting the van as I waited on the 4:37 to pull into the station. We didn't get many calls for pickups at Ronkonkoma this early in the morning, but weather delays in the Midwest had caused someone to switch to a Southwest flight out of MacArthur later that day. The station was a cold and lonely place at that hour and when a winter wind kicked up, blowing litter around in whirling eddies, hurling pebbles and grains of road sand into your windows, it felt like the end of the world. Maybe it was. I felt so fucking guilty about how I'd treated Tommy D. that I found myself hoping so.

I never used to be a guy who felt guilty much, mostly because I didn't think I had that much to feel guilty about. People live their lives somewhere on a scale of Have-to-dos and Want-to-dos and I was always the kind of guy who turned have-tos into want-tos. When it snowed and I shoveled my driveway, I'd shovel my neighbors' driveways, too. Not because I felt obliged to or because I thought I'd get some kind of payback, but because I wanted to. I'd had a happy nature once in spite of my miserable drunk of a dad and my shy, almost invisible mother.

Maybe it was because I never wanted for much. It was my experience that the real name of the devil was wanting. I'd gotten those few things in life I did want: a loving family, a good job, a nice house. Simple things made me happy: watching a ballgame, reading a book, sitting in the sun in my backyard. When you aren't ambitious, when you don't covet. When you keep your dreams simple and your grasp short, there's not much to lie about, no need for scheming or deception. Absent that stuff, what is there to feel guilty about? I don't know, until John Jr. died, I felt like I had my little piece of the world by the balls. I thought I understood the order in the universe. Turned out I understood nothing, let alone everything.

As I sat, waiting for Mr. Lembeck's train to show, I reread the newspaper clipping Tommy Delcamino had left behind. I didn't know why I was reading it again except to punish myself some more for acting like such an asshole. Whether he knew about my son or not was beside the point. If anyone on the planet should have understood Tommy D.'s frustration or had empathy for him, it should have been me. I had been exactly where he was now: lost, guilty, and grieving. I wondered if Tommy D. had other family—a wife, maybe, brothers and sisters. I wondered if they had done what we had done when we found out the hurt doesn't stop. That there is only you and your wife and your daughter. And somehow, blameless or not, you all wind up blaming each other and burning down everything you have because you have to do something with all the pain.

One thing was true, Tommy hadn't exaggerated about what they'd done to his kid. I could only imagine the mess those autopsy photos must have been. I wondered what it must have been like for Tommy D. to go identify his son. I'd been around the morgue enough to know the horror involved when a parent comes to identify a child. If there's anything that's wrong in the world by its very nature, it's that, a kid in the ground before his parents. For that reason alone I should've at least heard Tommy D. out.

I knew the spot where they'd left his kid's body. It was only about five minutes north of the Ronkonkoma station. That area around Nesconset and Lake Grove was full of these little wooded lots choked with poison ivy, prickly vines, and shrubs in the summer. Mean with bare, twisted limbs, and fallen branches come the cold. Places where the little neighborhood kids went to build forts or explore and their older brothers and sisters went to drink or get high or study anatomy. As was often the case, a man walking his dog found the kid's body.

There was a banging on the van door window that had nothing to do with the wind. I looked up to see a man's angry face staring in at me. I looked beyond the face to see the train sitting in the station and noticed a few passengers fighting the wind and their exhaustion to get to their cars. I hopped out, opened the door for the rightfully angry Mr. Lembeck, and tossed his bags in the back of the van. There would be no tip for me at the end of this ride. That was okay. Mr. Lembeck couldn't punish me any more than I was already punishing myself.

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