

SPEAKER

A Novel



PETER WALLACE

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *SPEAKER*

Peter Wallace has written an unforgettable novel about communication, trust, faith, and the power of embracing our individuality. Entertaining, thought-provoking and beautifully written, *Speaker* is tough-minded magical realism for the 21st century. Trust me, you'll never talk to your pets the same way again.

— **Karen Karbo**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Yeah, No. Not Happening*.

Part fable and part adventure story, *Speaker* is that rare piece of beautifully written fiction that both enchants and compels. Peter Wallace exalts in the hope and wonder of a child coming of age while exploring the deeper, more adult meanings of language. On the pages of *Speaker* is an imagined, stunning world where the animals have more wisdom and humor than adult humans could ever hope for.

— **Ann Garvin**, *USA Today* best-selling author of *I Like You Just Fine When You're Not Around*

In his highly original debut novel, Peter Wallace creates a cast of diverse urban characters in Brooklyn revolving around a recently transplanted 14-year-old boy, Hamish Taylor, who finds that he can talk with animals. A gift he barely fathoms, he must use it to protect the community he gradually builds around himself. Somewhat like in Phillip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, Wallace combines magic realism and moral clarity in a riveting story with an intellectual undertone. It is also a love song to Brooklyn. I recommend the audiobook version because the author's reading of his own poetic text is astonishing, as he finesses the mix of character and animal voices so perfectly.

— **Laurie Taylor**, author of *Said the Fly*

Hamish is an endearing and unforgettable character. This teenage boy, gifted as a Speaker to the animal kingdom, discovers he has a sophisticated mission and an array of surprising allies that puts him on par with yet deeper than Mowgli, Pi, or even snake-whispering Harry Potter. *Speaker* is a poignant book about the power of words and love and devotion to a higher purpose.

— **Jeffrey Davis**, author of *Tracking Wonder: The Surprising Path to Effortless Mastery*

Set in a contemporary Brooklyn filled with stressed-out parents, Russian mobsters, eccentric chess players, streetwise cops, and a panther who hunts her prey in Prospect Park, *Speaker* is the story of a real teenager with real problems who learns he has uncanny powers that can change the world. A supernatural adventure and a journey through grief and coming-of-age, *Speaker* is one of those rare novels that resonates with readers of all ages.

— **Arthur Goldwag, author of *Cults, Conspiracies and Secret Societies* and *The New Hate***

In *Speaker*, Peter Wallace has fulfilled the ancient promise of storytelling as medicine: an immersive event from which we emerge inexorably changed. Masterfully weaving the polarities of the magical (yet utterly believable) voices of the animals with an unflinching navigation of the horrors human beings can perpetrate against one another and nature, Wallace transmits a potent message that we would not believe without the horror and we could not bear without the magic. Every sentence of *Speaker* is a surprise: an utterly original use of language and thought, yet resonating some primordial knowledge inscribed in our cells. When you close the book and walk out your door, you will find the world transformed, opened. Every living creature—the sparrow, the cat, the coyote, even the human—will be recognized as part of an intimate yet symphonic conversation that was always alive beyond your awareness. *Speaker* is an essential contribution to the tapestry of wisdom working to dissolve the illusory walls human minds erect against the natural world, walls that must go if we are to succeed in changing the vector of the real-life story of destruction coming to climax on our planet today.

— **Kim Rosen, author of *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words***

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To the animals. All of us.

PART 1

LEARNING TO SPEAK

CHAPTER 1

By the time Hamish found out he was a Speaker, he'd been through two of the three telling traumas of a young life: the death of a loved one and the uprooting of his home. Divorce, the third, of course became impossible once his father had passed.

Nobody could understand how a Speaker could appear so young. Usually, the skill of understanding all different animal speech comes with maturity. Hamish was many things, but at fourteen he was certainly not mature.

I suspect his father knew his true nature.

This is what Hamish tells about the moment he knew his father was going to die:

Hamish was just beginning to forget about the unfinished cancer. Ed, the main stable hand at Mohegan, had called and asked Hamish to grab his bike and get to the stables.

"It'd only take you a minute," Ed said. "Your daddy's asking. Got a problem with Aching Thunder—you know, that mare, stubborn as a goat in July?—she having some issues with her foal. Your daddy think you maybe got the touch to get her going, get this little one outta her. You game?"

Hamish had been a help to his father as Henry moved away from his disease and back into his veterinary work, and not in the way a child is let in on adult activities, not like a boy gathering sticks instead of real firewood. His father had said he'd never seen anyone who attracted animals to him the way Hamish did, which makes it seem as though he

knew something of his son's future. Songbirds landed within reach of Hamish's hand when he was outside. A chipmunk would occasionally zip through his legs as the shortest route home. Late one spring night, his family came home to find a bear leaning against the front door where they lived in the Pennsylvania hills. It ambled over to the car as they drove up and tapped on Hamish's window as though it had an appointment. And the horses in their stalls always walked over to him, snuffling in his hair and gently shoving at his chest with their muzzles.

Hamish arrived at the track stables sweaty, tossing his bike to the ground and running down the row of stalls. Henry, on his knees, looked up from the supine horse.

"Oh, good! Let's see what—"

But Aching Thunder, her belly round as a giant's potato, suddenly lurched herself around and up to her feet, leaning back and forth to get her balance. She moved towards Hamish, opening her mouth as though to bite him. Henry reached to grab the halter, but Hamish raised his hand to her neck.

"I got her," he said to his dad, and his dad let go. Hamish could feel the hot quivers of the mare's skin, smell the stinky paste of fear in her blood. The pain registered as huge—night broken by hollow streaks of lightning. Hamish leaned his face into Aching Thunder's cheek.

"Hurts, hunh?" he whispered.

The foal started coming out with a gush of fluids, its front legs under its head as though it were praying. Henry eased it to the ground, and Aching Thunder turned to look. She pushed at Hamish's head to get him out of the way, and she stood still, her flanks shivering a bit.

Sometimes you just need the right witness.

Henry threw the towel he'd been using to wipe down the foal out of the stall. He yanked a stethoscope out of his bag in the corner and shouldered the ends into his ears, placing the diaphragm on the foal's body as though putting pins in a map. He flung the stethoscope over his right shoulder, the curve of the ear pieces hanging on his neck, and he pushed and pushed on the foal's ribs. Then he suddenly grabbed the foal's head, holding the mouth tightly closed, and sucked mucus out of the nose. He turned and spat gobs into the hay. Then he put his mouth back on the small horse's nose, and breathed in.

“Ed,” he said between breaths. “Massage the chest. Right there.”

“Got it.” Ed, with the hands of a craftsman, moved the new muscles and bones, trying to help the air get into the lungs, while Henry Taylor breathed into a new-born horse’s nose.

Hamish’s hand rested on Aching Thunder’s neck as they watched, sure the foal would cough and rise.

But it was Henry who coughed. The fit consumed him. Hamish could see blood on his chin, and he was hoping it belonged to the foal, but knew it came from deep inside his father, magma bellowing up from under surfaces not meant to be breached. His father was choking, and Ed turned all his attention to him.

Hamish couldn’t get his hand off Aching Thunder, not until the ambulance came, and Ed removed his hand gently, like a prop that was going to be used again. He never knew whether the foal lived or died.



Sarah Taylor got a day shift, and Henry Taylor’s doctor’s appointments started anew. Then there was the hospital again. After they took out Henry Taylor’s voice box in the fall and they started radiation and chemo again, Hamish and his dad exchanged notes on a steno pad, “The Mute Pad.” Hamish wrote back on the same page as his father. Sometimes he drew. He started not talking just as a game since his dad couldn’t talk yet. His mother wasn’t worried because he still talked, on occasion, with her and with kids in his school. So he wasn’t acting out, even though he seemed young for fourteen. But it became a point of pride, and a new way of communicating with his dad that no one else could share.

One note started as Hamish drawing a boy falling down an endless hole with a winged elephant’s trunk acting as a bungee cord that the boy’s outstretched hand held onto. Henry Taylor had written,

You know you’re crazy, right?

Hamish had written back, *Not as crazy as you!!!*

Why? Cuz I got this cancer craziness going on?

Oh that and so much more!!!

What more???

I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.

Or:

You want to become a vet like your old man?

SOOOOO old!!!

You have a gift with animals.

I don't know. Maybe.

It may be more than a gift.

What are you talking about?

More soon. Too tired....

Or sober, on one little sheet:

Your mom?

6:00.

Eat.

Are you going to die?

Squiggly pen marks crossed out a couple of lines, then:

I will die. I will not want to, but I will. It will seem like the hardest thing in the world for you, but it won't be. It

That note never finished.

Hamish kept all the notes in an army green box that held, among other treasures, a fossil shell collected on the Maine coast when he was younger, a nearly whole robin's egg, pale blue-green in its nest of Kleenex, one of his baby teeth, a small wedding photo of his parents, and a postcard from Bali that his aunt Shirley had sent him when he was five.

And then, with a suddenness that was inexplicable, his dad was in a hospice facility forty minutes from their house.

And then he was gone.

Hamish forgot even the most mundane things, like whether he had brushed his teeth. There were vacuumed gaps in his days and nights which frightened and numbed him. There was such a rush and Hamish couldn't get his bearings, a sailor suddenly on impenetrable land after months on a rocking and frothy sea.

Everyone always said it was going to be OK.

There was a movable gathering – first in a funeral home, then at a graveyard, and finally in his house. He knew it was the funeral but he could only watch as though covered with plastic. His rich Uncle Colin, Henry's brother, held him for an eternity in an inarticulate hug and then put him out to arm's length.

"I'll make sure you guys are looked after when you come to Brooklyn," he said, nodding at his own thoughts. "Aunt Cammy and the kids, well, you know we all love you."

"Brooklyn?"

"How dare you tell him!" It was Hamish's Aunt Shirley, in from the West Coast. Ten years younger than her sister, she was a fierce free-spirit – at least that's what Sarah called her. "That's not your job. You fucking rich people." Shirley smacked Colin's arm hard. She was a little drunk.

"I just wanted to—" Uncle Colin backed away.

"Well, don't!" Shirley pushed him.

Sarah moved in. "Shirley Weg, stop that!"

"But he —"

"What do you mean, Brooklyn?" Hamish tried.

"Don't—"

Hamish yelled, "What do you mean, Brooklyn!"

His mother turned to him, nervous and abrupt. She confirmed it: they were moving to Brooklyn, a place he'd visited once when he was six, a place that just seemed like movement and cousins who knew more than he did in a country where he didn't even speak the language. Before he could recover from the horror, they were packing and eighth grade was over and he didn't really have a chance to say goodbye to anyone. They moved.



Brooklyn.

A strange place for the emergence of a Speaker. It sounded to Hamish like a place out of old movies with harsh, fast people who had been to war, or who lived above bars and walked the streets with swagger and fear. It seemed like a sentimental place, with one tree growing in it, where children get sick and die hopeless deaths surrounded by poor family members and neighbors who can do nothing. It looked like a gray and rusty place, all asphalt and crumbling edges, with crowds of odd-looking characters in washed-out colors and cars lining every street as though waiting for the junkyard. Hamish could not imagine being cursed to a worse hell.

Back towards the end of May, Sarah Taylor had gone to New York City for a few days, leaving Hamish with Saba and Bubbe Weg, Sarah's parents

who'd come up from Florida to stay for a while after Henry's death. She instructed them all to pack up the house. When she'd come back, it was like his mother had turned into a different person, infected by that city with wide-eyed urgency and a forced, winner-take-all enthusiasm. She'd laid it all out for him, like a surgeon explaining a complicated double-amputation to the patient.

"They call it a railroad apartment because it's laid out like a railroad car, you know, long and narrow. We were so lucky to get it, especially in Park Slope. Uncle Colin has this connection, this guy in real estate, who knew the owner of the building and someone had just moved out, so he put in our name and we got it. No fees. The rent's OK. You get your own room. Look—" and she pulled over a piece of paper and a pen and started drawing a long rectangle.

"Mom—"

Drawing. "Here's the living room. You can see out across the street to the park. Here's your room. The window only goes onto an airshaft, but it's something. I know it's not like you've got here, but we're on the top floor so you get some light."

"Mom. Mom!"

"Honey..."

"Why do we have to move?"

"What do you mean? We talked about this."

"You talked about it. I never said anything. I just don't get why we have to go."

"Hamish, I got a job there."

"You had a job here!"

"It's a better job. And we've got a lot more family around there than here. We've got no one here."

"You've got no one. I've got someone. I've got my friends. This is where I grew up. Besides, you don't even like that family. You think Cammy is a phony and you've always hated Colin for how he treats Dad. How he treated Dad."

Sarah bowed her head. She crumpled the paper. When she looked up at Hamish, there were tears starting in her eyes which she sniffed back.

"I've got to go," she said, "And you're going with me. We're going to try something different."

“There is no reason to go to Brooklyn.” He stood up, knocking over the chair behind him.

His grandfather Saba Weg came to the doorway. “Everything OK?” he asked.

Hamish tried to drill holes with his eyes. “You can’t make me,” he said to his mother. “I am already—I have plans—high school, here. Just because dad died doesn’t give you the right to ruin my life.”

Sarah’s eyes were streaming tears as she tried to peer into the refrigerator.

Hamish screamed and stamped from the kitchen, backhanding a coffee cup on his way out that smashed through the backdoor window that he knew someone would have to clean up.

They moved to Brooklyn.



Hamish called his best friend Charlie O’Keefe back in Plains. They made up schemes for his escape. He could get a bus from Port Authority to Wilkes Barre, and then hide out over the summer. At the end of August, he could just arrive at school the first day as though they’d never moved. How would the school know? He’d get most of his food from the school, and Charlie would help. He knew of places he could homestead—barns and abandoned cabins he and Charlie had scouted as kids. He could even break into summer houses, staying quiet all fall and winter, until spring would bring new hope and new solutions.

The day after they got to Brooklyn, Sarah’s shift started early. Hamish waited until she’d had a chance to get on the subway before he began to pack his bag with care, taking good boots and a jacket for a different winter, his entire savings of \$473 in cash, some pens and paper to keep himself from going crazy, his treasure box, a sleeping bag and some of the family’s camping equipment. By 4:00 that afternoon he was in Pennsylvania, on the street, heading towards his rendezvous with Charlie.

They were going to meet at the new Starbucks that had opened just before Henry Taylor had died, where Charlie and Hamish used to meet to have coffee and grown-up conversations. Hamish went into the coffee and spicy smells and wash of air-conditioning, looking

around for Charlie. Charlie was at the back and looked like he'd just been arrested. Sitting with him was Mrs. O'Keefe, who turned and looked at Hamish wearily.

As she drove him back to New York, Mrs. O'Keefe droned about the times she moved, how she thought it was the end of the world but it wasn't, how when people died they went to a better place, how time healed. Hamish wanted to reach over the seat and throttle her, crashing the car and feeling his flesh burn in the gasoline fire and hear her and Charlie screaming in pain before ambulances and fire trucks roared up to the hopeless cause. But he sat in the back looking at the darkening landscape slide by, pulling his lower lip out and letting it go.

When he got to the apartment in Brooklyn, his mother tried to embrace him at the door, but he shouldered his way past and into his room. He heard the two mothers talking, expressions of sympathy and support and gratitude and commiseration, all out of the playbook on mothers of adolescents in crisis.



I know Sarah Taylor felt a desperation for Hamish and herself that only movement could fill. She couldn't get anything out of him. The conscious concrete of his adolescent silent treatment squatted in a sludge of violence; the pediatric oncology ward where Sarah worked was a haven compared to this.

Sarah determined Hamish was going to be occupied, and with the help of her sister-in-law Cammy Taylor in Queens, she signed Hamish up for a chess class and something called Junior Rangers in Prospect Park, in the hope that his brain and his urge to escape to nature would be mollified. His uncle Colin had also promised to give him some part-time work at his real estate development company, just so all his time would be taken up.

"Honey," she said at his door. "You can't go out while I'm at work."

From the bottom of his room, "You're grounding me?"

"You ran away."

"I ran home," he said through the door.

"You can't do that and not tell me."

The door suddenly flung open. Hamish was tall enough to look her in the eye, and that shocked her.

“You decided we were moving to Brooklyn without telling me.”

She held his eye. She could see him, restless as a caged monkey.

“Fuck you,” He said. He grabbed his keys and headed out the door as though it were his job.

CHAPTER 2

Hamish knew his life was ruined completely. Movement seemed to be the only thing that calmed him. He spent every free moment walking, walking in as straight a line as he could until his calves were numb. His walks ranged for miles around Brooklyn. He found himself in industrial cul-de-sacs, on crowded blocks where there wasn't one other white face, in neighborhoods where clothing seemed more like costumes, on tree-lined streets with noisy clouds of green parrots instead of pigeons, on postcard beaches, movie-set row houses, bucolic schools, and strip malls in Chinese. He went from apocalyptic desertion to circus fecundity in the space of a couple of streets. Wide, crazy avenues with wild, crazy trucks and town cars driven by Italians and Nigerians and Ukrainians and Pakistanis and Hungarians and Ecuadorians and Jordanians. Or tiny streets, with small decorations on the quiet houses, a pot with a plant in front, maybe, with a small chained dog barking, or a motorcycle being repaired and smelling of oil on a tiny square of cement next to the brown plastic garbage cans. At any given moment on his travels, he found he could be in almost any given spot in the world if he blurred out his peripheral vision and sucked in his breath to silence the adulterating noises. He could be in the forest, he could touch the soil that breathed a darkness into his nostrils, that made him feel strong, that made him feel like the crumbs of black earth on his fingers digging through fallen leaves and loam were connected to his heart and his legs, and that when things got buried, they seeded and grew and you could come back and see them whole and giant and waving in the crackling

winds, ready to walk with you over the mountains and into the white, white snow.

The chess club his mother had enrolled him in—a kind of leash, Hamish thought—met three times a week at a small storefront down on 4th Avenue, a mad-dash place furious with buses and trucks trying to beat the elevated highway traffic and taxis crowding out from and returning to their garages like desperate geese finding a landing spot in the pond. Then two days a week he was expected to show up at a “Junior Ranger” program in Prospect Park where they learned about flora and fauna even in the middle of the largest city in the nation. It only made him despise the city more. He couldn’t believe there were people who didn’t know where milk came from.

His first day at chess, his mother came with him, opaque to his distress at being left in a small room crowded with tables and mixed metal chairs and one young kid with a buzz-cut next to the wall playing a game of speed chess by himself, clicking the clock and banging pieces down on the files and ranks with childlike precision. Sarah Taylor had a low conversation with Kaphiri Shenouda, the teacher. Hamish, paying no attention, caught the words “summer” and “quiet” and “father” and “talented” and “lost.”

“Not to worry, Mrs. Taylor,” Kaphiri Shenouda said, taking her check and guiding her to the door. “We will not falter.”

Sarah Taylor looked at him for a shocked second, trying to parse his peculiar phrase. She called to Hamish, “I’ll see you at home,” and then left with a bell tinkling on the door and a sucking of traffic that muffled under the doorjamb.

Kaphiri Shenouda turned like an elephant in a circus ring, his dark Egyptian eyes glittering from under brows that sprouted black hedges, only making sense because all the features of his face were way too big by themselves.

“Hamish Taylor. A strong name. A humble name. Good. Let’s see your chess chops. Come.”

Hamish was suddenly sitting at one of the tables with this large man who seemed as though he was actually sitting at four or five of the tables and occasionally dusting the walls with his voluminous clothing, even though the heat outside was enough to soften concrete and the

air-conditioner over the door complained like a randy cat. His sausage fingers delicately placed the pawns.

"I place the men at their starting gate. You, the pieces. Give them homes."

Hamish reluctantly set up both the black and the white sides.

"Well done," said Mr. Shenouda with one clap of his hands. "But let us reverse the King and the Queen so the Queen is on her own color. This way she can recognize herself."

Hamish flushed deeply, ready to stammer an excuse for forgetting even the most basic thing. But the Egyptian moved forward like a flood.

"And now we begin. And this is the beginning." He reached his hand across the board. "My name is Kaphiri Shenouda, from Alexandria in Egypt. I am pleased to be your opponent."

Hamish looked at the hand in front of him as though it had appeared out of a cloud. He could not but put his hand into it, like putting his hand into a building made out of bread. It was strangely comfortable.

"Hamish Taylor."

"From?"

"Up on Prospect Park West."

"I thought you were from a place in Pennsylvania, the forest of the Quakers."

"I was. But we had to move."

"But that is still where you feel the presence of home, no?"

"I guess."

"Then. Until Prospect Park West is your refuge, your nest, where you are from will have to be elsewhere. And that is...?"

"Plains, Pennsylvania."

"Ah. Superb. You're white. It is your move first."

Hamish was not ashamed of his play. He knew that Mr. Shenouda was not bringing his full force to bear on the game, but his attention was generous and unwavering. When Mr. Shenouda moved a piece, always with a warm "Ah!" or calculating "Hmm," the round and crinkly scent of curry or flax urged itself across the chess set with the movement of his garments.

To close the brief endgame, Mr. Shenouda announced, "And now we finish with a: Check. Mate." He moved his remaining black rook gently

next to Hamish's white king, and once again he extended his hand, into which Hamish's hand became folded. His smile was serious and inevitable.

"We have much wonderful work ahead of us." Little did either of them know, yet.

The small bell above the door broke into the room like a thief and four young teenagers crowded in out of the heat.

They were all boys, and so much like a miniature council of races it was comical. Mr. Shenouda made sweeping introductions.

"We have a new student with us, starting today. This is Hamish Taylor, newly from Plains, Pennsylvania, but his people come from here, and from Europe previously, Ireland and Russia many years ago. Hamish plays a very thoughtful game. Be careful of letting him relax.

"This is Daniel Zhao. His family is most recently from Hong Kong—"

"Mr. Shenouda! One hundred years is not recently. We're more American than you are."

"Of course you are. Daniel plays a reckless game and is therefore to be considered a dangerous and unpredictable player.

"Abraham Shelley. His people were brought here from West Africa 180 years ago. They have been in Brooklyn since the Civil War."

"Hey, man." Abraham shook Hamish's hand loosely.

"Abraham's game is very fast. He likes scorched earth. Do not play his game."

Abraham snickered and rolled his eyes as he threw his backpack on a chair.

"That is Steve Mondolfi. Jews from Italy who came early on the swelling tide of fascism—"

Steve looked up from adjusting pieces on a board, his jaw tighter than a strung bow, his blue eyes stretched with angst. "Oh, Jeezus, Mr. Shenouda, can we just play?"

"Watch him, Hamish. He plays two games at once." Kaphiri Shenouda rotated his bulk easily to take a diminutive dark-eyed boy under his gaze. "And this is Pradeep Rao. His people hail from—"

"Yeah, yeah, India, we know, we know." Pradeep played up his annoyance.

"Not just India, but Tamil Nadu in the south, home of one of the oldest civilizations in the world."

"Why you have to do that?"

"Tell our newest where you are from?"

"Yeah," Pradeep turned on him. "What difference does it make?"

"Our past and our ancestry are a part of us here. It gives us a head start to know what that is."

"I still don't get why you do that all the time," Pradeep grumbled his way into his chair.

"Hamish, you will play Pradeep," Mr. Shenouda announced.

The rest of the afternoon was spent playing two games and watching Mr. Shenouda go through an endgame in which Abraham and Daniel were engaged. Steve played the kid with the buzz-cut who had been sitting by the wall when Hamish first came in. After a while, Hamish realized the kid was a girl. He kept on looking at her as she played, trying to figure out how old she was. She did not look up from her game. She moved her pieces confidently but disinterestedly, hitting the clock button with pieces that she captured. She won, and then ignored everyone, writing in a notebook for a while, then going to the back of the room and lifting a polka-dotted sheet that was over a bird cage and peeking under, mumbling in a falsetto.

Suddenly there was a piercing scream. Mr. Shenouda glanced back.

"Madonna!" he called to the jungle voice under the sheet. "You know we can't have that."

"Can I take off the cover, Kaphiri?" asked the girl.

"All right, my dear. But remember: do not put your finger near her."

The girl dragged the sheet down to reveal a cage with a large car-paint blue parrot bobbing its head and screaming its guttural scream again. The scream was cut off, and the parrot blinked, twisting its head as though to get a better perspective on the scene.

"Whoa," said Hamish. "Time out." And he went between the chairs to get closer to the parrot.

"She'll bite off your finger," whispered the girl. The parrot gave a chirrup in agreement.

Despite the warning, Hamish came close to the cage. She was a panoply of blues, with yellow rings around her black eyes, and yellow cheek flaps at the smiling point of her ivory black beak. She turned her head completely upside-down to look at Hamish, then whipped upright and came closer to him, shuffling along a wooden bar.

“Can she talk?”

“She has never said anything I can understand,” said Mr. Shenouda, coming behind them. “Oh! Hamish, how remiss of me. This young person is my friend Polly.”

Polly rubbed her buzz-cut hair and looked at Hamish with mysterious self-satisfaction.

“I thought you could teach parrots to talk,” said Hamish.

“She is a hyacinth macaw, a jewel of her species. She was left in my care by a famous dancer when I was not all that much older than you are today. These creatures live an astonishingly durable time. But she cannot live in the wild; it has been too many years. She should be in the Amazon. But, alas, she is here, with me. I call her Madonna, don't I, yes.” Mr. Shenouda handed Madonna a grape, which she took from his fingers with a delicacy suggesting connoisseurship. She walked the rest of the way on the wooden bar until she was as close to Hamish as she could get. Then she reached up to her beak with her foot, gently grasping the grape and handing it out between the bars in Hamish's direction.

“This is impossible!” gasped Mr. Shenouda. “You must take it. Carefully!”

Hamish lifted his hand slowly and took the grape. He sensed only momentarily the scaliness of the foot and the smoothness of the claw. For reasons unknown to him, he bit the grape in half with his teeth, chewing his half, and handing the other back to the bird. As she leaned her head to take it, Mr. Shenouda's breath sucked itself to a stop. She took the grape in her beak, and nibbled it, turning it with her foot, and watching Hamish the entire time.

The boys had all gathered around, and now asked if they could try it. Clearly, feeding Madonna had never been allowed. But Mr. Shenouda denied them their turns. He said quietly to Hamish, “You now have a friendship. And a responsibility.” He patted Hamish's shoulder gently. “And there's someone you should meet.” As impossible as Shenouda thought it was, he was already thinking of Thaddeus Knox.

Hamish nodded without hearing, watching the hyacinth macaw watch him.

CHAPTER 3

The shower could barely keep Hamish awake, even with only cold water stinging the top of his head. His body throbbed with heat. His skin was icy and hard and sticky with clean. He rubbed his hands quickly over its film of running water, ready to slap his hands on his stomach or thighs.

Sarah knocked and opened the bathroom door.

“Mom!”

“I’m sorry, honey.” He could hear her slurp coffee. “You remember this is the weird week with my shifts all over the place. I have to be at the hospital in an hour. That silly Sunday dinner at your Uncle Colin’s made me change my whole schedule. Oh! Dammit. I’m going to be late. Honey, I’ve got to go.” She started out the bathroom door, her voice fading as she closed it. “You remember about Junior Rangers?”

Hamish grabbed the shower curtain to get his head out. “Mom, that is so fucking stupid.”

She stopped closing the door. “Well, you’ve ‘fucking’ got to go.”

“Why can’t I just stay here?”

“It’s either that or you go to Queens to your aunt and uncle’s. You want to spend every day with little cousin Drew?” Hamish said nothing. “Unh huh, I didn’t think so. Today, it’s Junior Rangers. Next week, you work with your uncle. There’s directions about the Rangers thing—” she pointed to the kitchen table “—and a note from me if you need it. And I love you.” She left the bathroom door open, and Hamish heard her leave the apartment.

Hamish and his mother had gone to his uncle's landed-gentry house in Queens the day before for an official welcome-to-New-York Sunday dinner. His Aunt Cammy served them soft-shelled crab, flown in every day from Chesapeake Bay to a shop in Manhattan and expensive as gold. His relatives were among the very wealthy. Hamish's father used to grouse that Cammy's mother, being old money, hated the peons who worked. She was only slightly mollified that Colin had money of his own, he having shepherded some of the largest real estate deals in the city. Hamish's three cousins were aliens, even though 17-year-old Samantha and her older boyfriend with his prosthetic leg intrigued and attracted Hamish so that he actually thought he would like to stay and become friends. They sang a duet together for Hamish up in the attic "music room," and Hamish felt he was in the presence of movie stars. He asked Samantha's boyfriend David how he had lost his leg, and David laughed a full and long laugh, saying no one had ever had the balls to ask him like that, straight out. His older cousin, Jeremy, was away at college, and eleven-year-old Drew stayed in his room with his guinea pig playing computer games.

Hamish's Uncle Colin, a plumper and buttoned-down version of Hamish's father, admonished him to appreciate the opportunity he was being handed by being able to intern in real estate, and cuffed Hamish's cheek as they said goodbye.



The very idea of Brooklyn Junior Rangers made Hamish feel like a warrior who'd been handed a squirt gun. He felt accustomed to wilderness. The summer before Henry Taylor's testicles swelled and hospitals became a part of the family routine, Hamish and his parents went up to Maine to camp. It was the first time they had been able to get away together since Sarah had gotten her job at Geisinger Hospital about an hour away in Danville. They packed the car full of gear and tied the canoe on the roof. Hamish was awestruck at the firm swiftness of his dad's knots, and his confident shaking of the boat and car to make sure winds wouldn't launch the craft somewhere in New York or Massachusetts. As they were locking the front door, Henry stooped down to the eight-year-old Hamish.

"I've got something for you for this trip."

Hamish knew this was a grownup moment because Sarah said, "Henry, are you sure this is such a good idea?"

"We'll teach him. OK?"

Sarah sighed, clearly understanding this was going to happen. "OK."

Henry took a small red box out of his pocket.

"This is something you have to be careful with. You have to use it with great respect. For this summer, you can only use it when me or Mommy are around. OK?"

Hamish was mystified and already grateful. "OK."

Henry opened the box and extracted a Swiss Army knife from under its elastic. He handed its smooth lipstick-red and stunning mirror-chrome body to Hamish. It felt weighty and alive in his hand. He opened the main blade, pulling against oiled resistance until it clicked into place, ready to cut.

"It's very sharp," Henry pointed. "You can open all these other things when you like, but this one and this other smaller blade, only with us there. See that one?"

"Uh-huh," Hamish acknowledged.

"OK. Let's go."

Maine was a blur of compact adventures and isolated moments of practical wisdom, lodged like charged and life-altering photographs in his mind. His father teaching him how to make a fire with nothing but his new knife and three matches. A moose swimming in the lake, its rack of antlers dripping and oddly clumsy. Fresh-water mussels on the bottom of the cold water, seen through a mask that opened up a door to a vast and closeted world. Smoking out mosquitoes from the tent flaps in the rain. Tracking a black bear through a bog, and seeing it drift into trees up ahead. Paddling into the wind, knowing his father in the stern could steer them straight. Pulling foil-wrapped potatoes out of the fire with sticks, brushing off the ash and stabbing into the hot and soft flesh and watching butter melt into it. Landing a lake trout from deep in the cold, dark waters and splitting it open from anus to throat, spilling its innards back into the water and sloshing its body clean.

The second to last day, Hamish woke very early. His mom and dad were dark rumpled shapes in their sleeping bags. Hamish slid under the

tent flap without zipping it open, avoiding that sharp cold sound. The air was moist and chilly in his nose. He put his jacket over his pajamas, planted his bare feet on the path that led further into the woods. He could feel pine needles and remnants of fallen branches on the soles of his feet that pushed slightly into the loam as he walked. He could hear the breeze on the lake, feel it as the air arrived through the trees. The sky was not even blue yet, it was so early.

The first wolf appeared in front of him about ten yards away. He could see about seven of them in a loose semi-circle between the trunks and undergrowth. The first wolf was gray—pure gray with black on his ears and tail and white cheeks and belly. The others seemed more mottled, one almost solid white and beige. The gray wolf walked slowly to him, his liquid yellow eyes never wavering. His head only had to lean up until his black, cold, wet nose touched Hamish's, and he licked Hamish's chin and mouth once. Then all the wolves turned and trotted away through the trees.

As though it were a dream of flying in which he knew he actually flew, young Hamish knew he would never tell anyone of the visitation of the wolves until he told me so many years later. He walked back to the campsite and made a fire for the first time by himself. As the flames started a satisfying crackle, he turned to see his father watching him. His father barely smiled and gave one nod of his head as though in confirmation, as though he knew what had happened, as though he knew everything that would ever happen.

The small, memorable disaster of the trip happened at the end, when they were canoeing off the lake. Hamish was in the middle of the boat with the rolled-up tent and packs, using the knife's little magnifying glass to pin-point the sun on a leaf he'd brought along, when—in some kind of mysterious and sudden magic trick—he lost the knife over the side and it disappeared. His father stopped paddling, and the silence spread out into the world.

"Damn," Henry breathed. Sarah turned, questioning. "Hamish's knife. Gone."

"Oh..."

Hamish felt the tears start.

"That's too bad," said his father. And he started paddling again.

Often, in times to come, Hamish would imagine going back to that lake and somehow retrieving that knife from the depths.

He didn't need this little Brooklyn Junior Ranger educational experience. He knew the difference between deciduous and evergreen, between insects and arachnids, between magnetic north and true north. He would survive, not perish like a helpless child in the forest. But his mother had decided this was how he was going to spend two mornings a week, traipsing around Prospect Park with children, learning about plants and animals and gardening. Juvenile detention would have been a better choice.

∞

The kids met at the Picnic House, a brick building that looked like it didn't know the difference between a picnic and dumpster-diving for pizza. Upstairs was an open room that was used for functions and wedding receptions. Downstairs were some offices and bathrooms with sheet-metal urinals and large closets with equipment and cardboard boxes of supplies. Ranger Sally greeted parents and sitters while focusing her loud cheeriness on the children, stooping slightly even when the child was her height. Her blond ponytail hung out the back of her hat, and it wiggled as she effervesced. She was like a puppy about to get long-anticipated kibble. She leaned down to Hamish.

"And what's your name, young man?"

"Hamish Taylor."

"Where's your mom?"

Hamish looked at that dimpled face. "At work."

"Oh," Ranger Sally said, momentarily defeated. "Well, I wish she'd been able to drop you off, don't you? But here you are —" she checked him off on her clipboard "—and I'm sure it'll be just fine. You're one of our older ones, I see. I'm sure you'll be a big help. You can wait over there until we get started."

The morning was a blur of resentment. There were about fifteen kids in the group. The two oldest were fifteen-year-old girls who smoked cigarettes behind trees when Sally and the other Ranger were wrangling the fifth and sixth graders. The other Ranger was a skinny, laconic college student named Hurley. His hair fell almost to his shoulders and had the look of stringy

vegetables about to turn. He guided children with his large hands, saying nothing and looking off into the distance. Hamish decided he was on drugs.

Their task that first day was to clean up the Fallkill Falls and pool, the beginning of the watercourse in the park. Water traveled some hundred miles from the Catskills and was pushed to the highest point in the park just off Quaker Hill, then it spilled down over rocks placed more than a century ago in an attempt to recreate a babbling mountain brook and ravine. The water could be turned on and off like a kitchen faucet. Thousands of wandering Brooklynites had, over the decades, left tons of litter, and, as Ranger Sally giddily announced, it was their awesome job to help restore the park to its original beauty and glory.

Everyone spread out with black plastic bags and gloves and sticks with metal spears out the end for poking at garbage. Smaller kids squealed and splashed, and huddled in an intense little group as Sally picked up a beetle or small amphibian or worm in her hand and expounded in a disquisitionary chat on its place in the cosmos.

They were allowed to go over the fencing that kept people on the paths that wound around the ponds. It gave everyone a sense of seriousness and entitlement. Hamish did his best to separate himself from the others. He climbed around the side of Fallkill Falls and up to the top where the water came out of a grated hole. He could see Shauna and Vivian, the old girls, lighting up down the hill towards the playing fields and spitting out sudden streams of smoke. On the other side most of the kids had gathered around Sally, their crushes obvious in their eagerness to comment on the turtle in her hand. Hamish jabbed the ground with his litter-stick, his cloak of loneliness gaining weight with each breath and each spark of metal against rock. The white noise of the waterfall made the edges of him seep into the heat, and the hot smell of powdered bark crawled into his sweaty pores.

The crying sounded like it was coming from his brain at first. But it was such a snotty crying that he looked around to spot the culprit. It slowed, and he heard a girl's voice muffled by the waterfall, "You stupid stupid Mongol. Why are you so stupid?" He leaned over the edge of the rocks and there at the bottom of the falls was a plump girl, her shoulders quaking which she would then control with an angry and despairing "Oh, so stupid stupid stupid."

Hamish called down, "Are you OK?"

The girl tilted her tightly braided head up, her black skin darker than anyone's Hamish had ever seen, and then Hamish could see the wide set eyes of Down syndrome.

"I lost my glasses."

"You need some help?"

"I'm older than I look."

"Oh. OK." Hamish was at a loss. "Congratulations."

"My mom's going to kill me if I lose my glasses."

"Do you want some help?"

"I can't find them."

"Hold on a second, I'll come down."

Hamish scrambled down and skirted a couple of large boulders to find the girl sitting on a rock with her shoes submerged and her pants and lower part of her shirt soaked. Cool drops splashed up from the rocks behind her as the water dribbled from above. She had clearly spent some time looking.

"How did you get back here?"

"I was getting that." She pointed to an empty Nester bottle with the label half worn off.

"So where'd you lose your glasses?"

"They were just here."

Hamish could see them in the water next to her foot. "Let me look around." Hamish splashed here and there, turning over rocks and grabbing at leaves dramatically, until he finally came nearer the girl.

"Oh, here they are! Hiding. Glasses always do that."

The girl shrieked. "There they are! You found them! Wow, man, you found them." She held them religiously for a moment before suddenly sticking them on her face.

Hamish was surprised at how thick they were, distorting her dark eyes small and making it impossible to know where she was looking.

"I love you," she said. "What's your name?"

"Uh, I'm Hamish."

"I'm Clothilde White." She said her name with a near-lisp that, oddly, revealed a sense of pride. "I'm very pleased to meet you." And she stuck out her hand.

Hamish took the proffered hand, and Clothilde shook his violently as her smile opened on her dark face.

“You are my hero. You saved my life. My mom would really kill me if I lost these glasses. They cost a fortune, and we can’t just go around spending fortunes on glasses, you know.”

“That’s OK. I’m glad I could help.”

Clothilde stood in the water and wrapped her arms around Hamish in an enthusiastic embrace. Hamish looked up to look away, and there at the top of the falls, leaning over the boulders, was a man—maybe 30, maybe 50, maybe even older—inexplicably in this heat wearing a full-length duster and a wide-brimmed hat. He tipped his hat to Hamish, turned and disappeared. This was the first time Thaddeus Knox had ever seen Hamish. Of course, it wouldn’t be the last.

Hamish felt witnessed.

Extricating himself from Clothilde, Hamish suggested that they find everyone else.

“Good idea!” exhaled Clothilde, as though Einstein had just walked into her life.

Hamish turned. There, on the other side of the pool was a red fox. His black nose was polished, and the white and black tip of his tail preened to a point. His white bib was a bit dirty, and his legs were that black of having just escaped the tar pit. He watched Hamish steadily, as though he had an expectation of him.

Hamish stopped Clothilde with his arm. “Look! It’s a fox.”

Clothilde surveyed the scene and whispered, “Wow.” Then she asked, “Where?”

“Right there.”

The fox moved quickly away, up and over the hill.

“No, he’s gone.”

“Oh, shoot.”

Hamish thought, A fox in the middle of Brooklyn? A man fresh from the old West or the Outback? Chess prison? Do I really hate my life so much, or am I just going crazy?

“Come on, we should find the others.”

They had to walk all around the ponds to find the group. Clothilde stabbed leaves on the way with little cries of triumph—a fencing match with the earth. A couple in their twenties jogged along the path, red faced and gleaming sweat. The man stumbled when he saw Clothilde, and he turned to jog backwards for a few steps, his face playing with pity and disgust. Hamish felt himself move closer to Clothilde, who was shouting at a duck on the pond, “Come over here so I can see you! Don’t be afraid of me!” He stared the man down, and the couple faded around the bend.

“Clothilde!” Hamish touched her shoulder. “I don’t think the ducks like being shouted at.”

Clothilde’s eyes widened at this new idea. “Oh,” she breathed. “OK. Shhhhh!” She took Hamish’s hand as though he had walked her through the woods since the beginning of time.

Vivian and Shauna, the smokers, came up behind them.

“Who’s your girlfriend?” They giggled as they trotted faster and left them behind.

Clothilde leaned towards Hamish and said in a stage whisper, “That girl’s jealous of her friend.”

“What are you talking about?”

Still in a stage whisper, she continued dramatically. “She’s in loooove with her. But she won’t tell her ‘cause of the boyfriend.”

Exasperated, Hamish insisted, “Come on. Let’s go.”

As soon as they found the group on the edges of the lower pond, Clothilde ran up to Ranger Sally.

“We saw a fox! We saw a fox!”

“Oh, Clothilde.” Ranger Sally looked her over, shaking her head at the mud and the wetness. “What happened to you?”

“We saw a fox. Tell her, Hamish.”

Sally put her hand on Clothilde’s shoulder. “There are no foxes in the park. Maybe you saw a dog.”

“But Hamish said—”

“It must have been a dog.”

Hamish breathed deeply. “It was a fox. A red fox.”

Everyone looked to Sally. Even Hurley paused, wondering which way the wind would blow. Sally’s voice was lower.

“There are no foxes in Prospect Park. There are feral dogs, and you have to watch out for them. It’s easy to mistake a dog for a fox.”

“This was not a mistake. This was definitively a fox. I’ve seen them before. At home.”

“Well,” said Sally, breaking the bubble. “Why don’t you take Clothilde back to the Picnic House to help her clean up. Thank you!”



Pick-up happened just before lunch, when everyone turned cranky. Hamish realized that Vivian and Shauna had already absconded, returning to the home turf of the streets. So Hamish headed towards Prospect Park West from the Picnic House. But suddenly Clothilde grabbed his hand and yanked on it.

“This is him! This is him! He found my glasses. See? They’re here. I’ve still got them.”

Hamish saw a girl catching up to Clothilde. She was clearly her sister, older, slimmer, even darker skinned, and with straightened bangs over her oval face. It occurred to Hamish how very few conversations he’d ever had with a black person.

“See?” said Clothilde. “This is Hamish.”

The girl took Clothilde’s hand possessively. “Thanks for helping Clothilde.”

“It’s OK. No problem.”

“I’m Lilly.”

Hamish cocked his head; he couldn’t help himself. “Lilly White?”

“Don’t even...”

“Sorry.”

“My parents were really stupid.”

“No, it’s—”

“You in ninth-grade?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“We just moved here. I’m going to Herman Melville High.”

“All right! So’m I.”

It slipped out. “You’re fourteen?”

Clothilde tugged. "Lilly. We gotta go. You can fall in love later."

"Clothilde! Stop that." She turned back to Hamish. She smiled. "Why, how old are you?" She laughed at his silence. She indicated Clothilde pulling on her. "Really. Thanks for taking care."

Hamish just lifted his fingers, embarrassed. He wanted to touch her shoulder.

CHAPTER 4

He didn't want to be alone in the apartment. He had a little time before he had to go to downtown Manhattan for the job his uncle had arranged, so, as usual, he walked. When he realized he was getting near the chess shop, he did an abrupt turn from 4th Avenue up 9th Street.

After a dreary post office was a McDonald's, and he thought maybe he would go in. His mother never went in. It wasn't that she didn't allow him to go, it was just that she held it a moral failing to succumb to the hype and sugar and salt and fat of a conglomerate that claimed to serve "billions and billions." "Of what?" Sarah would ask. "Dead cows from the Brazilian rain forest and poisoned potatoes from the fields of Idaho?" It was when Hamish had caught her smoking a cigarette outside their house in Plains the week before they moved to Brooklyn that he realized there was sway to everything. Nothing was hard and fast.

As Hamish reached for the glass door, some girls came pushing out. There were five of them, wearing mixtures of pajamas, lace, and high fashion. The first one, an Asian girl about Hamish's age, bumped into him and looked at him as though she had stepped in dog-poo. She laughed too hard at her friends following her, another Asian girl and three white girls. They were nervous and stunning, like young horses, and their laughter was a cartoon of itself. The last girl touched Hamish as they came through, and she muttered, "Sorry," as she left. Hamish's jaw burned where she had brushed him with her fingers, and he watched her get into a long black limousine with the other girls. A man with a fedora and wearing a light leather jacket and rings on each finger followed. He

caught Hamish's eye and pointed a blunt finger at him, looking down it as though measuring Hamish with a knife.

"I know you, faggot. Don't get any ideas." The man laughed with a personal glee. He almost skipped to the limo and got in with the girls. The limo drove away.



His stop was Park Place, and he thought he should be playing Monopoly. He hadn't realized that the properties in Monopoly were real places—even though the places were in Atlantic City—until he'd moved to Brooklyn. He'd been told to meet a woman named Fiona McKenzie at a new building that his uncle's firm was developing. Hamish was to help make the model apartments ready for viewing that weekend.

As the subway screeched into the station, Hamish felt his peripheral vision contract, as though he got up too fast and the blood was rushing out of his head. He left the car and held onto one of the painted I-beam posts as the train left the station, rumbling loudly down the tunnel. As the train receded, the noise did not, but changed into a charged hubbub, demanding attention. Hamish looked around as though he would place the sound, but there was nothing but the stuffy station with a few bored people waiting for trains. Hamish found the stairs, but the noise, which seemed now to be coming from just out of his sight in all directions, pressed him.

He was pulled south and west, stumbling past the wrought-iron fence surrounding Trinity Church—such a tiny place amidst all the skyscrapers. He knew it was the wrong direction—he was supposed to be going east—but he felt an irrefutable compulsion to follow his feet which seemed caught in this river of sound no one else could hear. He didn't know it, but he was headed towards the World Trade Center, still a fenced off construction zone after the burning pile had been taken away cinder by cinder over the course of a year.

Suddenly a seagull landed on the sidewalk in front of him. The seagull flapped his wings wide and cried that seagull cry, somewhere between a scream and a call. His wings lifted him inches, and he did a clumsy crash landing. Another gull imitated a hummingbird two feet above

Hamish's face, his beak spread wide as he called down. Very soon, gull after gull was zooming from one side of Hamish's vision to the other, as though pushing him back. People pulled themselves up as though dodging spray from a tire through a puddle. The first gull advanced on the sidewalk, another gull joined him and ran forward, leaning out to peck at Hamish. Between the sounds in his head and the squawking at his feet and above, he turned and walked quickly away, over City Hall Park, and onto the Brooklyn Bridge.

As Hamish headed up the long ramp of the bridge, he could feel its cables directing all sight and sound into a vanishing point way ahead, as its designers the Roeblings, crisscrossed as they were with their own disappointments and loss, had intended. His breathing slowed as the sounds of a thousand voices quieted in the breeze at the crest of the bridge. At the end, he veered left and walked up the chaos of Flatbush Avenue, past Junior's and Fulton Street, past the no-man's land of the Atlantic Yards and up the slope to Grand Army Plaza. He knew he should find a way to call his uncle, but he couldn't. That chore was like a small memory from another year. Something else was going on.

The end of the afternoon was hot. As Hamish entered Prospect Park, dust hung in the air, and each breath brought turmoil to the lungs. All the color of the park was leached and putrid, and the shade of the trees that Hamish crossed under only wavered the temperature, like ripples in old glass. Someone was setting up some small electric-orange cones on the great lawn, marking out a field for soccer later that evening. No one else was out in the sun except people walking through it, a kid on a bicycle, a man with a dog pulling him along. And then he saw it, just out of the corner of his eye.

The squirrel fell spinning, bringing a few leaves and twigs down from what must have been forty or fifty feet. Hamish heard it scream, and he didn't know squirrels did that. It hurt the inside of his head. Hamish was stunned, thinking to himself that squirrels never fall out of trees. That's like a bird suddenly falling out of flight. Like a cloud in a blue sky turning into a bucket of water and splashing down. Like a huge boulder powdering into a handful of dust. Like a man becoming an infant in an instant.

He kept the place where the squirrel landed in his eyeline. He tried to hold his breath, but it escaped with a cry. There were some early evening

dog-walkers in the distance, a dehydrated runner down West Drive going away. He could even hear a kid's skateboard grinding the asphalt at the Bandshell. The heat wanted to suppress all sound, and only pinpricks of wavelength touched his ears, like strong stars in a misty night sky. He nearly expected ambulance sirens, blue and white police cars emblazoned with "Courtesy Professionalism Respect" on the back doors, SWAT teams in black, K-9 units, at least three cherry or lime fire trucks and men with long sloping helmets, big boots, and yellow axes in their hands. But there was nothing. It was as though the heat had become a blanket of thick snow, softening all edges and muffling all vibrations.

There was a scream of delight from up in the trees.

We got one! Over here!

There wasn't anyone in the tree that Hamish could see. He peered up, searching for some high-school kid who'd climbed up and was using his perch as a terrorizing look-out, and he looked around for other kids to appear from behind bushes, wearing threatening T-shirts and chains dangling from their belt-loops. But there was only a crow that leaned forward off its branch and dipped towards the ground where Hamish had seen the squirrel disappear. Its wings curved, scooping itself to a stop, hopping and looking around as it landed.

Hamish heard, *Come on, guys! But remember, I got here first.* But still he couldn't see anyone.

Hamish ran towards the squirrel. He heard little shrieks of *Look out!* and *Down!* and *Off!* and *Away!* as he slapped through foliage to arrive near the base of the tree from which the squirrel fell. The crow glided up into a small elm with what seemed like a *Whoa, fellas. We got a live one here.*

Ridiculous. Fourteen years old, and I'm insane, thought Hamish. He decided to ignore whoever was being so obnoxious.

The squirrel was on the ground, its hind legs useless, its feather-duster tail crimped and mangled. Blood was seeping from its wet nostrils.

Hamish's ears thundered.

It happened very easily, like cool water spilling gracefully into a parched throat.

Kill me? Be quick.

It was the squirrel. And Hamish knew he was answering.

I'm not going to kill you.

The squirrel's eyes were hard. *I'm not a plaything.*

No.

Hamish realized there were no birds singing, but that the stuffy breeze carried voices as though he were on a crowded street full of conversations and families and vendors and cops. It was difficult to narrow in on any one.

He was at the center of a horror movie.

Leave him alone!

Hamish looked up to see another squirrel upside down on the bark of the tree about ten feet up, her tail stiff against the trunk, her head angled out as though to stare him down.

From further up in the tree, another squirrel cried out, *Get away, you idiot! Get away!*

Hamish looked down at the dying squirrel. The squirrel on the tree launched into a diatribe against Hamish, touching on everything from his lineage to his ugliness and stupidity, as she scooted fast inches up the tree.

The squirrel on the ground was breathing fast and shallow. His eyes hadn't left Hamish. Hamish knelt. Language came from inside his head, inside his sinuses, the tilt of his head.

What can I do to help?

For a minute, Hamish thought perhaps his insanity was complete and true. But the squirrel responded.

You're speaking to me.

Yes.

I've heard of you.

How?

All have heard of you. You exist. You speak.

I don't understand. Hamish was near tears with his confusion.

Don't kill me. The squirrel was begging.

I don't kill.

This is so strange.

Hamish looked up from the ground. The other squirrel had come silently down the trunk until it was only a few feet away from Hamish's head. It stared at him as though looking into a hopeful abyss.

What are you?

I'm a boy.

Yes. No.

The squirrel on the ground coughed. A ruby of blood surged out of its mouth. There was almost no breath left.

It was the softest whisper. It didn't even come in Hamish's ears, but through his skin.

It's the Speaker.

And the squirrel was no more.

The other squirrel zipped up the tree, screaming, *Speaker! It's the Speaker. Watch out! It's here!*

Hamish was empty. This felt more like a dream than any dream he'd ever had, but with a tangible and connected clarity to it, fog dissipating to reveal the solid ground he'd been walking on all along.

He felt rather than saw the crow land on the grass a few feet away.

You gonna share?

Hamish looked at him. His whole body and mind morphed as he said to the crow, *What the hell are you talking about?*

This took the crow three feet off the ground, and straight back down.

Whoa! He crept closer, leaning. *Do that again.*

Do what? Hamish was suddenly impatient. His body, his musculature, the positioning of his eyes, the air inside his nose felt like they were transforming. Only later would he be able to explore how each language changed his being. This language was harsh and comical.

Oh, wow! This is amazing. Guys! Guys! Come here! We got a—I don't know what we got.

Hamish heard yelling in all directions from different trees and from the sky itself. It was like a gang of boisterous bikers, circling and collecting. A few crows landed outside the first crow's domain. Questions started.

Has it got food?

Get back, idiot.

Did it kill the squirrel?

Did you say it spoke?

This is stupid dangerous.

Is it going to leave the squirrel?

Who said it spoke?

Hamish didn't know how, but from deep in his gut came a geyser. QUIET!

Like a shaken sheet, all the crows at once jumped back a few feet. They turned their heads and maybe moved one judicious foot.

Someone whispered, *It spoke.*

The first crow said, *I've heard of this.*

Hamish looked at him, pinning him with some sound that came from the back of his throat. *What have you heard?*

Of you. I've heard of you.

A crow above Hamish's head said, *Are they talking to each other?* And a few responded,

Yes.

Yes they are.

Don't know how, but they are.

Careful. Those humans can kill.

When can we get the squirrel?

Keep distance.

Can it say anything else?

The first crow hopped around in front of Hamish. *That's what you are! You're the Speaker.*

This started a loud argument among the crows, which stopped suddenly when Hamish said, *That's what the squirrel said.*

All the crows were silent and that felt dangerous.

The first crow stepped on a stick, its black feet curling around it. *You spoke with the squirrel?*

Yes. He said I was "The Speaker."

The crow was careful. *And the squirrel said this to you?*

Hamish looked at the crow steadily. *Yes.*

Wow.

The crow jumped into the air. *Let's go!*

Hamish felt the instant impulse to follow the crow's directive and he would have, had he wings. As one, all the crows were in the air, banking out over the park, collecting in an oval of ragged black points above the trees, and heading east.

Everyone had left him with death. The white of the squirrel's belly was pristine. Hamish picked some leaf-dirt off. There was still heat coming from the small body, residents abandoning a ruined city in a steady stream, leaving all their homes and belongings and taking nothing but

themselves. Hamish settled in his mind, a ship slipping down from its cradle into the sea. He knew it was time to go.



The middle of the night is always private. The circles of privacy can enlarge to include many people and passions and destitutions, but mostly it's one person in a place whose edge is hard to fathom and felt as an orbit or magnetic field. Hamish stared into the dark. There were red glowing numbers from his clock. A tiny green dot of light came from something plugged in. He could sense a change in the density of the blackness where his window onto the airshaft was. Shapes of the things of his room had no substance, just looming solidities with soft boundaries and sharp threats.

His dad was still dead and the world had changed.

He had barely talked since the crows took off. He played the whole scene over and over—the squirrel's fall, the whoosh of wings, the small and fatal bit of blood, the anger of his mate, the sideways eye of the first crow. Sarah had had dinner ready when he'd come back, and Jim Lehrer was almost over.

"What happened? Where have you been?"

"Sorry." Hamish sat with the food.

"What happened?"

Hamish hadn't looked at her. "Nothing."

"You said you'd be home by the news. And it's almost over."

"Sorry, OK?"

"And you didn't go to your internship."

Sarah stewed, picking her battles. "There's orange juice in the fridge. And you've got to call Uncle Colin in the morning."

Hamish picked at his food, and then slugged his way to the cupboard for a glass.

"You want to watch 'West Wing' with me before I go to the night shift? It's a rerun, but I don't think we saw it."

Hamish shrugged and hid his mouth in the juice. He sat down, listening to the slightly Texan drawl of Jim Lehrer thanking him and bidding him good night.

By the time his mother had gotten out the door at 10:00, he had been holed up in his room staring at a blank sheet of paper with one mark slicing diagonally down its face. She had admonished him to turn out the lights and go to sleep. He'd said he would.

The night kept on going.

He got up, turning on a light. His fear was beginning to make him angry, and his loneliness was making him fed up. His dad had once said to him, "You gotta have someone you can call in the middle of the night, and they won't hang up on you no matter what. You can always call me."

Right, thought Hamish, and where the hell are you now?

Hamish went down the hall to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and looked in for a long time. Milk. Juice. Bowls with Saran Wrap—leftovers. Weak celery. Butter. A jar of dill spears. A half-drunk bottle of wine.

Nothing.

Hamish went into his mother's bedroom to get out onto the fire-escape. The air was cooler. The city gave off a huge hum as he ducked his head to the outside. A constant buzzing of millions of the tiniest machines ever crafted, with the occasional minuscule honk or shout or slam. He sat, feeling the flat metal struts through his PJs, and the bars felt almost cold on his bare back. The black sky had an ochre cast to it, lights from below hanging their waste on the wind.

The railing of the fire-escape clunked and then reverberated as though someone had dropped a knife into it and it stuck. An owl had appeared out of the night and landed suddenly. He ruffled his wings together and stretched his tail, letting the feathers snap back into place. His gaze was on Hamish.

So it's true! The owl's manner was pragmatic.

"*What the hell?*" Hamish heard himself murmur. Could he understand everyone?

The owl stared. Hamish could feel what to do to speak. It was as though his brain became a different color, his throat changed shape, his muscles could all operate individually, his nasal passages deepened. This was completely different than talking with a squirrel, but not so different from a crow. The part of Hamish that could speak with an owl did not have any interest in human concerns. He had an awareness of weather, of night, of sounds that were for the moment his entire world.

What the hell is going on?

The owl fluffed. *I think you're supposed to tell me that.*

But I can't believe it's real. I can't believe this is really happening.

The owl was not put off. *A Speaker comes. Change comes.*

It's not me. How could it be me?

It seemed like the owl was laughing, although Hamish couldn't be sure. Nothing that Hamish understood from any animal, then or now, translated into Hamish's native tongue cleanly. It is, at best, as Hamish has told me repeatedly, a pale representation of the experience of comprehension.

You are you, said the owl. *You are a change.*

Silence. The city hummed. The breeze was good on Hamish's skin. Hamish was filled with the idea—as we all must be—of what “change” is, what it fundamentally must be from the perspective of something other than himself.

Suddenly Hamish found himself asking, *Can you really see in the dark?*

Now the owl was laughing. *Of course. I can see in the daylight, too.*

Hamish felt sheepish. *Sorry.*

You'll let me know what the change is? If I should look out for anything?

Hamish shrugged, *Sure. How do I get a hold of you?* He felt sarcastic.

Call. I'll bring you something.

What? How do I call? Bring me what?

A nice mouse.

The owl fell from the railing and blended mutely with the night air.