Displaced

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By June of 1958, families began disappearing from Boston's West End neighborhood. Buildings emptied, their owners taking leave and forcing tenants from their homes. Joseph's elementary school closed early that spring. He collected the forwarding addresses of friends who promised to stay in touch. His own family's next residence remained unknown—despite the relatives who'd offered to host them, his mother had declined each invitation. She fought with his father most nights, unwilling to accept the eviction deadline, which loomed ever closer by the month's end. Even then she believed that the legal system could save them.

"Every last West Ender should be rehoused as a community. Not thrown out like dogs. We still have rights," she said.

The Boston Housing Authority had long forgotten its promises, wasting no time in tearing down those brick-faced tenement houses which crowded the labyrinthine streets in the name of redevelopment. Already they'd started in on the fringes of the neighborhood, transforming the West End into open cavities of space. The Charles River sparkled on the horizon between fat heaps of gray debris and rooftop shingles. Cranes with wrecking balls advanced along the streets. Bulldozer engines growled. Everywhere thundered demolition sounds—the destruction hidden behind tall, chimney-topped buildings not yet torn apart.

Still, Joseph's mother insisted on rallying the last of the neighborhood's holdouts, walking him and his older brother Michael to church on Sundays with "Save the West End" flyers tucked into canvas bags for distribution. For months they'd assisted her in a storeroom basement with other community activists, collecting signatures and designing picket signs, caught in her desperate fervor to save the world they knew.

Joseph clutched his mother's hand as they navigated passages of ruin. Towering mounds of jagged wood beams and concrete rubble banked either side of the decimated streets, now wide dirt roads devoid of their brick rowhouses. Acres of their neighborhood had been leveled. Occasional remaining streetlights appeared like black, disfigured skeletons. The enormity of space disorientated Joseph. He felt certain they'd soon lose their way without the familiar landmarks of storefronts with their steel, pulled-down grates, and street corners forever occupied by groups of young and old men alike. A stink of burning oil settled inside his nose. Dust swirled through the air, yellowing the sleeves and collars of their cleanest white shirts, pressed slacks, and ties. Michael trailed behind, glancing back toward the occasional muffled explosion in the near distance, forever drawn to trouble. Their parents had warned them about the sudden dangers of the demolition sites—falling debris and reckless bulldozers to name a few.

His mother feigned indifference to the noises, beaming a determined smile beneath her white sunglasses and blue kerchief, pinned in careful arrangement over her bouffant. She greeted passing West Enders—women in long skirts and heels; men in crisp suit jackets—and handed flyers to all. One couple, the Cataldos, who owned a small five-and-dime store on Barton Street, questioned the absence of Joseph's

father.

"In bed with a fever. Better he sleeps it off," his mother lied. His parents fought nonstop at home over his father's refusal to accompany them to church. He was too disturbed by the neighborhood's dismantling.

"Might make him worse being out here in all this bad air." Mr. Cataldo shook his head at the sight of an eighteen-wheeler lumbering forward a few streets ahead. Black smoke clouds emanated from the exhaust pipes atop its red cab. "All these years, I couldn't run my business on Sundays because I had to follow the blue laws but now the city can go on working like this?"

Mrs. Cataldo rubbed the slender bridge of her nose, as if also affected by the dust and fumes. She folded his mother's flyer in half without reading it. "We're leaving tomorrow. Staying with my brother's family in Medford."

Joseph's mother nodded. "A lot of people are headed there."

"When are you folks leaving?"

"Why should we? Our building's still standing, isn't it?"

His neighbors exchanged a pitying glance before Mrs. Cataldo squinted at Joseph's mother through her thick cat-eye glasses. "Oh Giulia, who are you kidding?"

His mother's smile thinned, but she pressed on with kindness, not one to lose face. "We could stop them tomorrow if we wanted to. If enough of us organized together, stood outside our homes, put our bodies in front of those bulldozers, and shouted 'Enough!'"

Mrs. Cataldo smiled now. "Would it really change anything if we did? I heard what happened with that Mother's March on City Hall you invited us to. The only people who showed up were the organizers. How can you go on like this, dragging those poor boys around town, trying to

stop the inevitable? Look around yourself."

Joseph shrank from the adults, who began arguing over the neighborhood's inability to resist as a community.

Sudden carnival melodies floated in the air. He pulled away from his mother, toward Marino the hurdy-gurdy man who appeared along the street, pushing a large ornate cart forward, as he churned the long handle of a box-shaped instrument, cranking out a syncopated air, the music loud and infectious. He was a short smiling man, an Italian from Naples, never without his thick horn-rimmed spectacles and tan fedora. Those around Joseph, including his mother and the Cataldos, gazed at the organ grinder and hushed. Smiles stretched across faces. Marino's presence was a strange and cheerful shock, heralding as he always did, the coming festivities of summer—the Saints Day Feasts, Fourth of July fireworks and parades led by exuberant brass bands. Perhaps he offered this, his last performance for the West End, as a tribute to those final holdouts—what happy memories might survive if music filled the streets.

As he passed, Charlie Kowalski hobbled toward them, muttering. "Damn shame."

He wore the same ill-fitting grey flannel suit to church each week, but today his dress shirt hung loose, unbuttoned and disheveled, from beneath the wrinkled lapels of his jacket, exposing portions of his chest and limp belly. His white hair stuck up, uncombed; his face appeared gaunt, the cheekbones sharper than usual.

"You OK, Mr. Kowalski?" Michael said.

The man grunted, incoherent. A stink of beer and onions emitted from his wheezing breath as he leaned toward Joseph and his brother. They resisted any cruel urge to mock him. Everyone in the neighborhood showed a particular kindness toward Mr. Kowalski, who'd lived alone since his

wife's passing some years ago. He'd served in World War I and often spent summer evenings sitting outside in his calamine pink lawn chair, drinking Schlitz beer, and trading casual remarks with anyone who passed by. If you hung around long enough, you'd hear him speak of the Argonne Forest in France and mustard gas burns, how his lungs had never quite recovered from battle nor his right leg, still harboring bits of shrapnel lodged inside bone.

"A Goddamn shame," he said.

"What is?" Joseph said, though he already knew what Mr. Kowalski lamented—the tall stone WWI memorial set to be razed, along with everything else in Adams Square. He'd passed it many times walking along Washington Street with friends, his gaze lingering over the protruding bosom of the monument's relief, a shapely young woman dressed in long classical robes. Names of men, including one of Mr. Kowalski's brothers, shone inscribed beneath the engraving—IN THE GLORY OF THEIR YOUTH WE SHALL REMEMBER THEM.

Another demolition explosion roared, closer than before. Mr. Kowalski dove to the ground, yanking Joseph with him. "Down! Down!"

He landed hard against his ribcage, the impact winding him. Michael sprang upon them, forcing apart the old man's grip.

"Let him go!"

He pulled Joseph up, whose forearms tingled, the elbows streaked with dirt and blood where he'd torn skin and the fabric of his shirt. A crowd gathered around Mr. Kowalski, who hugged the earth, dry-heaving—braced for the artillery shells that flew across his mind. Others tried to coax him into steadying his breath. They failed to lift him to his feet.

"Snap out of it, buddy."

"Come back to us, now."

"Better get a doctor."

His mother appeared at Joseph's side, pulling up the sleeve of his ruined shirt to inspect his wounds. Bleeding crescents marked the underside of his arm from Mr. Kowalski's nails.

"You'll be OK. That poor man is out of his mind." She sighed and instructed Michael to take him back home to bandage up the cuts, change into a clean dress shirt and hurry back.

Joseph followed his brother down the winding streets. "Never saw him like that before."

Michael shrugged. "He's a looney. Surprised he didn't crack up any sooner."

They cut down another uncertain stretch of dirt and rubble.

"You know where we're going, right?" Joseph said.

"Course I do." His brother had become more confident that past year after leaving school to begin his masonry apprenticeship, following in their father's footsteps as a tradesman. He hurried toward an untouched row of buildings. "I want to see what's going on first."

"What about church?"

"We'll be quick. You gonna be a wimp about it?"

"No."

Black smoke clouds extended in bulbous pillars over the flat rooftops they faced. Joseph soon realized their actual destination—right into the heart of the wreckage. His steps became lighter. Like old times—following his brother meant adventure, the kind that once consumed entire weekends and summers.

They crossed onto the remains of Poplar Street, passing

the blue striped awning of Kaplan's groceries—its darkened storefront windows empty; an iron grate locked over the door—then turned another corner and entered the site. Small clusters of men in white hard hats with black, diamond-shaped insignias worked inside a clearing the length of a city block, edged in towering mounds of dirt and brick. Dump trucks and bulldozers combed through the area, their wide tracks leaving deep impressions through the ravaged earth. A tall, contained inferno stood at a corner of the demolition field, providing the origin of smoke and odor. Joseph cupped a hand over his nose and mouth, retching at the acrid stench of burnt rubber and chemical waste.

"This way," Michael said, moving toward the flames.

They hid behind tall refuse piles, traversing the shadows of abandoned rowhouses lining the perimeter. Blown-out windows shone like gaping sockets. Joseph's eyes watered from the burning smoke. Strange explosions thundered from the great blazing fire pit. Joseph shouted once or twice for Michael to slow down, but the roar of trucks and bulldozer engines devoured his voice. Then his brother halted behind a towering mound of dirt and rubble, crouching low as he peeked over to one side. Joseph huddled behind him, following his careful movements. Heat warmed his nose and forehead. The inferno rose to the height of a small building, and they remained not ten feet away from it. Bulldozers gathered debris from nearby mounds, emptying piles at the foot of the fire. Muffled explosions roared, causing sudden plumes of flames to ignite. Joseph caught a sweet, pungent whiff of gasoline and trembled hard, fearing combustion.

Michael pointed out a pair of shirtless men standing atop a dump truck while a tall crane moved above them, spilling more rubble into the pile they worked from. The men pulled chunks of iron and steel, pipes, and cast-iron radiators from

the dirt. Joseph didn't notice the bulldozer that rumbled toward them until Michael screamed and grasped his shoulder. They scurried away from the machine's dragging teeth as it hauled what it could into the burning pit.

They ran, breathless, until they reached Pitts Street. Joseph coughed, unable to steady his breath or shake the pounding in his temples. Perhaps he'd never get the bad air out of his lungs and wind up with pneumonia, which had killed their grandfather not long after his release from that internment camp in Montana. The city's false allegations that his *nonnu* worked as a Fascist spy during World War II continued to shame their family.

Michael slapped his back and laughed. "That was close!"

Joseph massaged a stinging wetness from his eyes. "It's not funny. We shouldn't have gone there. What if someone caught us?"

"They didn't. Besides, don't you want to see what's coming?"

"Not like that."

They didn't speak of the demolition site again until later in the week when Michael woke him in the middle of the night, climbing inside through their bedroom window from the fire escape after a late night out with friends. Joseph sat up, full of questions. His brother revealed several copper elbows and tees, each about an inch in size, the kind of pipes used in kitchens and bathroom sinks. White and silver spark plugs appeared among them. Torn free from their engines. A demolition keepsake.

"We gave the bastards a little something to remember us by," Michael said.

Rumors of vandalism against the workers' equipment had floated through the neighborhood since the crew's arrival. Now Joseph could no longer separate his brother from

each new story overheard or reported in the newspapers—local delinquents shattering dump truck windshields and slashing tires or stealing shovels, wrecking ball chains and sledgehammers. Their father also eyed Michael with suspicion.

"You cause any trouble, watch out," he told them more than once during supper, and raised one of his clenched fists, huge and thick knuckled from years of masonry work.

"Yes, Pop," Michael said, his gaze downcast.

Joseph remained silent. He thought of the scrap metal pieces in his brother's nightstand drawer. There'd be no use tattling unless he also wanted a beating. Their father would discover Michael's antics sooner rather than later—in this neighborhood one's business belonged to everyone. Besides, their parents had little energy to waste on less immediate concerns. They'd just received notice that the first house on Pitts Street would be demolished in less than a month.

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Their expulsion came earlier than anticipated. One Tuesday morning after their father had left for work, Joseph and his brother sat in the kitchen eating bacon and eggs, when a fist hammered at their apartment door, followed by a loud, brutish shout.

"Everybody out! City orders. You got two hours!"

Joseph's mother set her coffee cup down upon the red checkered tablecloth with a definitive clink and rose. "Stay here a moment. Don't anyone move."

She smoothed down the wrinkles of her yellow housecoat and left their apartment, an immediate clamor of frenzied voices and baby wails escaping through the doorway. The surrounding walls thrummed with movement

and alarm, a cacophony of languages—Italian, Yiddish and Polish shot orders from stairways and rooms. Joseph bit his trembling lips, willing himself not to cry. Now they'd be cast onto the streets, forced to abandon all their possessions. Michael went to the open window above the sink, straining for a glimpse of the demolition crew outside. Soon their mother returned, the door slamming, her voice breathless, edged with hysteria, as she entered the kitchen.

"None of this is legal. What they're doing. We won't let them. Not this time." She blinked hard at Joseph and Michael as if suddenly realizing their presence. "They lied to us. The bastards gave us the wrong date on purpose. Get dressed, boys. We stop this now."

No time for questions, Joseph hurried after his brother into the bedroom they shared, trading their pajamas for jeans and t-shirts, getting their shoes on and half-tied before their mother commanded them to follow her outside. Her voice was agitated in a way that sent Joseph's pulse sprinting in his neck. How he wished his father was here.

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They stood to either side of their mother, blocking the front entrance of their tenement home. A bulldozer waited close by, its engines growling, low and steady. Neighbors crowded across the street, having vacated the building, and now gestured toward Joseph, convinced perhaps that his mother had finally lost it. Another demolition blast roared, drowning out their shouts as tremors rocked the earth. Joseph's ears began to ring. Red brick rowhouses collapsed at the far end of the road, turning Pitts Street into ash and rubble.

His mother lifted her small, pointed chin and squeezed

his hand tight. "Here they come now. Don't move!"

An enormous crane rolled into view; its skyscraper neck left Joseph breathless. The workmen herded away his neighbors from the demolition site. Then the crane pivoted toward a different building across the street. Its long steel chain pulled back, lifting the wrecking ball, catching sunlight as it rose backwards, before the metal sphere swung forward and rushed against the roof, exploding shingles. A thunderclap boomed, followed by an immediate crash as one side of the building imploded. Smoke clouds hung sideways, leaving an oily film across the sky as they vanished. Joseph's mouth and throat burned with an ashy taste. His eyes watered. He blinked hard, the tears spilling over his lips. The men who operated the machines turned their faces away, absorbed in the destruction. Joseph trembled, his limbs becoming rubber.

"Mom, they can't see us. They can't see us!"

He tried to pull away, but her hold remained steady, locked over him, her nails pinching skin. Michael stared ahead, entranced, his face calm and sure. Somehow their mother's voice rose above the deafening roar of the engines.

"They'll stop. They have no choice but to stop."

The crane turned toward them, the wrecking ball pulling into its pendulum swing. Joseph tore from his mother's grip, and rushed back inside their home, up the long curving flight of stairs that seemed to sway and move out from under him as the walls shook and crumbled. Dust sprinkled above his head, deep cracks appearing in the ceiling, pulling apart the walls from their crown moldings. Soon the roof would give.

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He remembered little of what happened next—some

neighbors alerting the demolition crew of his presence still inside or the workers rushing in to carry him back downstairs. His mother fainted and an ambulance was called, the sirens haunting his dreams for months. The city halted work for several days; the foreman spooked that a child had managed to remain inside a building marked for demolition. They did not refute the complaints of the mistaken eviction dates, instead redirecting their efforts in making sure all residents were properly evacuated. No exceptions. The West Enders' fates remained the same.

News of his mother's erratic behavior circulated among the entirety of Joseph's family. His father had returned early from work that same day, finding her in a state of nervous collapse. Those last desperate moments outside of their tenement home had shattered any remaining courage that once sprang through her unrestrained. She sank into a chair, listless and unresponsive, the whole of her deflated, offering a distant stare to anyone who tried to engage with her. When Joseph's Aunt Donna demanded that they come live with her family in Medford, his father didn't refuse.

The move equated to a confused and frenzied scramble with their possessions boxed, furniture wrapped in blankets, and everything hauled into a box truck that his father borrowed from work—A. Morelli Masonry & Concrete Contractors painted in thick black letters over its yellow doors. Joseph and his brother sat, cramped between their parents inside the truck, watching Pitts Street recede through the side mirrors until it dissolved into long stretches of empty, nameless lots, bordered by refuse. They exited Sudbury Street for the new I-93 highway.

Medford appeared wide and bustling, a city just minutes outside of Boston, lined in red and gold neon, full of various clothing and appliance stores, and a Howard Rust's Radamat

diner mobbed by teenagers. They turned past the towering Fellsway Theatre, and cut down several residential streets, before parking along the narrow sidewalk of a triple-decker, painted a vomitous green with faded white trim along its windows and front porch. Aunt Donna, his mother's only sibling, a round, smiling woman, greeted them. His cousin Jenny, a wet-nosed toddler, pulled at the hemline of her mother's housecoat, and babbled at them, giggling.

"Consider yourselves home," his aunt said.

Joseph found it anything but. Space remained scarce. The bathroom seemed occupied nonstop between the adults and his three young cousins. Uncle Lewis, a quiet, bespectacled machinist for General Electric, frowned over their presence, though he smiled at Joseph's father when presented with a case of Rheingold, his favorite beer. Their parents took the bedroom at the far end of the house. Joseph and Michael shared a floor mattress on the screened-in back porch.

"You boys have the best room in the house. These walls will slow roast you in summer," their aunt said.

She didn't bring up the incident that sent them under her roof or the dismal state of their mother, who remained alone in bed with all the shades drawn. No one dared to bother her, not even to request that she join the family for meals or strolls outside to discover their new neighborhood. The same day they began to unpack, Joseph stood outside her locked door, heartsick with longing, until the sounds of her low sobs and strange muttering frightened him away. Aunt Donna insisted on giving her space. Only Michael seemed to share Joseph's restless concern over their mother, his own sullen irritability keeping him quiet and subdued. Their father returned to work, arriving well after dinner, doing his best to avoid them.

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Joseph slept little that first night on the porch, too stimulated by the curious glow of the surrounding apartment windows, and the strange families moving past them—two ponytailed girls laughing over a magazine, the chain-smoking men playing cards, a woman in pink hair rollers washing dishes at the sink. Voices appeared and faded over TV laugh tracks, the dramatic crescendos of The Honeymooners' opening credits, a baby's wail, the gentle shwoosh of passing cars nearby. Savory dinnertime smells lingered through the night air, reminding Joseph of the indigestible hamburger-olive loaf that Aunt Donna had served earlier. Despite the screened-in enclosure of the porch, the occasional mosquito slipped inside, leaving itchy welts along his skin. Joseph pulled the thin bedsheet over his head, hoping to block out the insects and neighborhood lights and noises. He slept in fitful bursts, waking to his brother tossing shirts and pants from their suitcases, frantic beneath the reach of nearby street lamps. Joseph sat up, pushing off his blanket.

"What are you doing?"

"Thought maybe I put it in your bag by mistake."

He turned over the luggage, dumping their possessions together into the same messy pile—sweaters tangled with Roy Rogers cap guns and baseball mitts, underwear overrun by tiny green army men and matchbox cars, an old cigar box spilling out a few small pocketknives. Joseph seized a silver Rolls Royce model before it flew through a space between the wooden rails and hurtled off the back porch. His brother cursed, a strange whimpering rising in his throat.

"He can't find out. Bad enough he thinks I'm a bum as it is." Michael kicked away one of the suitcases and leaned

against the railing. He covered his face and breathed hard. Joseph drew his knees up beneath his chin as his brother revealed what he'd forgotten—the satchel full of masonry equipment, tools their father had brought over from Italy and had entrusted Michael with for the duration of his apprenticeship.

"You don't think they ended up with Pop's stuff somehow?" Joseph said.

Michael lifted his head, wiping his nose with the side of his hand. "No. I know exactly where I left the bag. On a hook in the bedroom closet. Not too late to get it back."

A chill prickled Joseph's spine. "But you can't. Everything's gone."

His brother raked a hand through his dark wavy hair, slicking it back behind the tips of his ears before he sighed and stepped forward, his face, that daring smirk which invited trouble, illuminated by a band of streetlight. Joseph twisted his hands together. Tension gathered in his chest as he spoke. "I mean, do you want to get a shovel somewhere and dig for it?"

Michael shook his head. "But the demolition was stopped, remember? There's a good chance our building's still up like how we left it. And if not? Then we go home and forget we ever had this conversation."

He returned to the mess of their belongings and began tossing a few rumpled shirts back into the open mouth of his suitcase. Joseph trembled. The prospect of returning to the West End cast an icy sweat at his temples, the roar and scrape of the bulldozer's teeth fresh again in his mind as he imagined wading through the rubble of their once home.

"We're not allowed back there. Besides, we wouldn't even be able to get in."

"Yes, we could," Michael said. "There's buses from

Medford Square that get us right there. Believe me, they close nothing up after dark."

Joseph squeezed a hand atop his knees. "What if we get in trouble?"

His brother balled together a pair of socks and hurled it into the suitcase. "Like what they did was right? Those eviction notices weren't even legal. Ma said as much. We could sue the city if we wanted to."

Now he sounded like her. Joseph wasn't convinced.

"Why do you want me to go?"

"How else will I know you won't rat me out?" Michael smirked. They'd both be in a heap of trouble if anyone found out. Sensing his hesitation, his brother turned toward him.

"Listen, I won't let nothing happen to you, alright?"

"OK."

He reached over and gripped Joseph's arm. "You can't tell nobody. Understand?"

"Yeah."

Michael returned to the pile, gathering clothes and toys, scooping them back into their suitcases. Neither fussed over what belonged in whose bag.

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A certain dread trailed Joseph all the next morning. Before they met their relatives in the kitchen for breakfast, Michael decided that they'd return to the West End at dusk when the demolition crew was gone. There would still be enough daylight to search for the tools. They'd be home in time for dinner that night. No one would ever know they'd made the journey there and back.

Joseph chewed his bottom lip raw, forcing himself not to say anything foolish which might expose them, especially in

front of their aunt, who hovered around the children like a nervous sheepdog, forever anticipating their next moves. He wondered if their mother might join them and when she didn't, he began to fidget, the plan siphoning his attention. His uncle shot him an impatient look over the newspaper which hid him from much of the family's conversation, until rising from the kitchen table to leave for work. He pecked Aunt Donna on the cheek and bid them all a quick farewell. Joseph's own father had already left at dawn. Michael kept his cool, whispering jokes about the pungent tuna casserole surprise baking in the oven for dinner, pinching his nose with a smirk.

"That's not a surprise I want to try."

They hung around the TV until their cousins began squawking over a toppled stack of multi-colored plastic blocks, and then Aunt Donna appeared before them, her brown hair transformed out from its fat pink rollers and framed around her face in wavy curls.

"Too nice to be indoors like this. We'll just drive ourselves crazy. Why don't we all have some lunch and go outside for a while?"

She served them bologna sandwiches before leading them out into the blinding sunshine, pushing a navy blue stroller along the smooth, hilly sidewalks. Joseph and Michael trailed behind, taking in the neighborhood, the yellow and beige triple-deckers interspersed with the occasional single-family home. Birch and green ash trees lined the streets. Squirrels chased one another along the branches overhead. Everything in Medford, or "Mefid" as Aunt Donna called it, seemed more spacious than the West End he knew before its destruction, the homes sturdier somehow. Impenetrable. She waved at several neighbors, greeting a few of the large Irish and Italian families who lived

all around.

"We're only a hundred yards from the Malden city line if you can believe it. Even closer than the bus. Half a blink away from Boston," she said.

They reached Haines Square, a loud, congested area teeming with people and traffic, the air heavy with car exhaust—reminding Joseph of home. Aunt Donna pointed out drugstores and grocers, a dentist's office, and a savings bank. Soon they approached the Fellsway Theatre, a grand and officious-looking building of sleek art deco design, which occupied its own block at the junction of Salem and Spring Streets. Beneath its arch-shaped roof, a marquee showcased in bold letters: VERTIGO. Sunlight reflected off a corner of a matinee poster kept under glass, the red print with its white swirling center and tumbling silhouettes of a man and woman soon blurring into dismemberment.

Michael turned to their aunt and presented some lie about meeting an old neighborhood friend with Joseph for a shake and fries at the Radamat diner nearby. Aunt Donna beamed over this, pleased that they were taking more responsibility for themselves under such difficult circumstances. Her red lips formed a sad, knowing smile.

"Well, you boys just be back in time for dinner. I'm sure this move is killing you."

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He followed Michael across two buses, the second depositing them near Scollay Square, its congested assortment of seedy flophouses, bars, and liquor stores peppered with familiar landmarks that lightened Joseph's heart—the Old Howard burlesque theater long ago boarded up, the Iver Johnson firearms store, and the Radio Shack

with its assortment of Kodak cameras, HI-FI stereo systems and televisions modeled in the display windows. Judy Garland flashed across one of the larger twenty-three-inch screens. The TV set tugged at Joseph with want. He turned away from the stores, fearful that if they lingered too long some creep might start following them. Soon Joseph and his brother came to the demolished edges of the West End, bordered by long panels of temporary chain link fencing. Michael stole a few cautious glances behind them, making sure that the coast remained clear, before approaching a gated entrance for the trucks and cranes. He found the chain locked around the gate posts loose enough to push the hinged barrier forward, creating a gap for Joseph to squeeze through. Then Michael climbed up over the fence as Joseph kept watch, his pulse knocking hard between his ears.

They advanced along wide passages rutted deep with enormous tire tracks. An eerie stillness draped over them; the air stripped of its noises of destruction. Their footsteps seemed to echo across a great void. The rubble piles seemed taller, the path forward becoming obscure. Somehow, they found their way back to Pitts Street. Michael rushed forward when their building came into view. It stood damaged but erect. The wrecking ball had taken a significant bite from its top corner. All the windows appeared shattered; the lobby door had broken clean off its hinges. His brother charged up the steps and disappeared inside.

"Wait!" Joseph raced after him, entering a space thick with blue-gray shadows. The wall switches failed to deliver light. Splinters of fast-dissolving sunshine reached through the windows. He sped up the crooked stairway, climbing several floors to their apartment, where Michael already moved through the rooms. At first glance everything appeared just as they'd left it, emptied of their most

essential possessions—though a lonely, disheveled quality resonated in what they'd left behind—the drooping curtains and soiled linens, a tea kettle, his mother's much-used ironing board forgotten in a corner, the workbooks from his last year at St. Mary's where he'd practiced his cursive. Deep cracks extended from wall to ceiling. The floorboards moaned.

"Found it!" Michael returned from the hallway, wearing the tool belt strapped across his chest. "Right where I left it."

Joseph sighed. "Great. Let's get out of here."

His brother said nothing but moved past him, taking in one last look at the rooms. He went out to the fire escape, where they'd played as kids, and gripped the top of the steel railing, assessing its sturdiness, and sat atop it as he once did on a dare.

"Don't fall. You won't make it," Joseph said.

"I won't?" Michael steadied himself with a nearby beam and leaned back.

"Stop. I'll tell Dad."

His brother hopped down and climbed back in through the window. "Killjoy."

The heavy silence followed them inside the house. Joseph felt some invisible force watching them, as if all the remaining objects in the rooms had come alive, holding their breath. Gray evening light seeped through the broken windows, pressing a chill into his skin.

"Can we please go now?"

Michael began inspecting the kitchen cupboards. "Let's see if Ma left anything behind. Might cheer her up." He climbed up on one of the countertops where he could reach inside the cabinets high above. "Oh, here we go. Look at what I found."

He pulled out a wide ceramic dish, perhaps a wedding gift she used on special occasions, and cradled it against his chest as he leapt down.

The floor gave out beneath him, expelling a sudden, unbearable crash—the noise of his body plummeting through wood and debris, disappearing into a plume of dust. Michael fell and kept falling.

The building swallowed him whole.