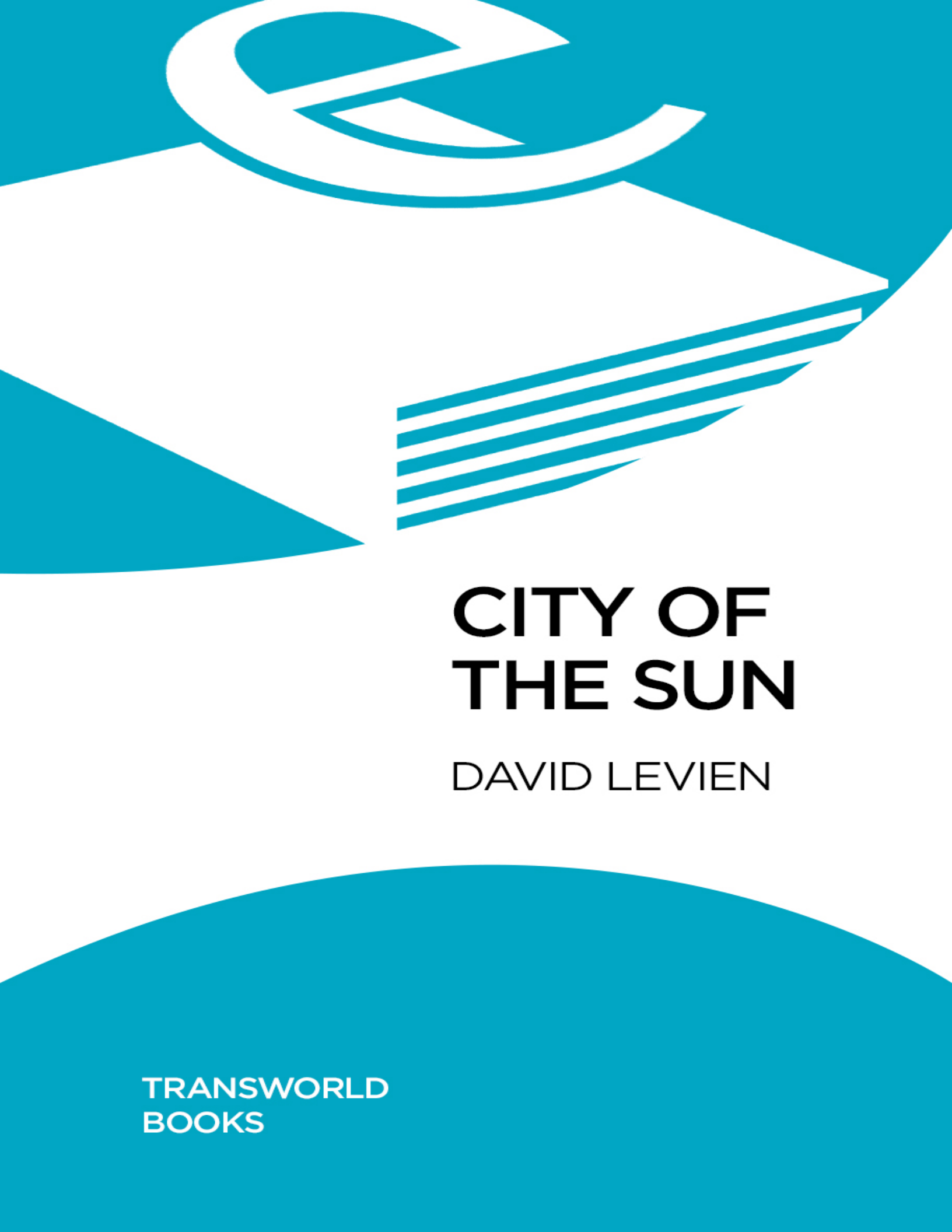




CITY OF THE SUN

DAVID LEVIEN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Jamie Gabriel gets on his bike before dawn to deliver newspapers in his suburban neighbourhood. Somewhere en route he vanishes without a trace.

Fourteen months later, still with no sign of Jamie and having lost all faith in the police, his parents make one last desperate plea for help.

Enter Frank Behr – a tough, reclusive ex-cop, abandoned by his former colleagues, separated from his wife and haunted by his own terrible past.

Behr doesn't make it a practice to take on hopeless cases, but the couple's plea for help awakens a personal pain he can't ignore . . .

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CITY OF
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For the missing and those who wait for them

ONE

JAMIE GABRIEL WAKES at 5:44, as the clock radio's volume bursts from the silence. He rolls and hits the sleep bar, clipping off the words to an annoying pop song by some boy-band graduate who wears the same clothes and does the same moves as his backup dancers. The worst. Kids at school say they like him. Some do; the rest are just following along. Jamie listens to Green Day and Linkin Park. It's three-quarters dark outside. He clicks off the alarm and puts his feet on the floor. Waking up is easy.

In the master bedroom sleep Mom and Dad. Carol and Paul. The carpet is wall-to-wall, light blue. New. The liver-colored stuff that came with the house when they bought it is gone. The blue goes better with the oak bedroom set, Mom says.

It was a good move for the Gabriels, to the split ranch-style on Richards Avenue, Wayne Township. Trees line most all of the blocks here. The houses have yards.

Jamie walks past his school photo, which hangs in the hall on the way to the bathroom. He hates the picture. His wheat-colored hair lay wrong that day. He takes a pee. That's it. He'll brush his teeth when he gets back, after breakfast, before school.

He moves through the kitchen - *Pop-Tart?* *Nah* - and goes out the utility door into the connected garage. Mom and Dad love it, the garage on the house, the workbench, and space for the white minivan and the blue Buick.

He hoists the garage door halfway up; it sticks on its track. A streak of black fur darts in and hits him low in the legs.

‘Where you been, Tater?’

The gray-whiskered Lab’s tail thumps against the boy’s leg for a moment. After a night of prowling, Tater likes the way the boy ruffles his fur. The boy pushes him aside and crawl-walks under the garage door.

A stack of the morning *Star* waits there, acrid ink smell, still warm from the press. Jamie drags the papers inside and sets to work, folding them into thirds, throwing style.

He loads white canvas sacks and crosses them, one over each shoulder, then straddles his bike. The Mongoose is his. Paid for with six months’ delivery money after the move to Richards Avenue. Jamie ducks low and pushes the bike out underneath the garage door, when Tater rubs up against his leg again. The old dog begins to whine. He shimmies and bawls in a way that he never does.

‘Whatsa matter?’

Jamie puts his feet on the pedals and cranks off on his route. Tater groans and mewls. Dogs know.

‘Should’ve gone to McDonald’s, you fat fuck,’ Garth ‘Rooster’ Mintz said to Tad Ford as he reached across him for a French Toast dipper. Tad’s face squeezed in hurt, then relaxed. The smell of gasoline, the fast-food breakfast, and Tad’s Old Spice filled the battleship-gray ’81 Lincoln.

‘You’re eating same as me,’ Tad said back. ‘You’re just lucky it doesn’t stick to you.’

Rooster said nothing, just started chewing a dipper.

Tad was unsatisfied with the lack of reaction, but that was all he was going to say. Rooster was seventy-five pounds smaller than him, but he was hard. The guy was wiry. Tad could see his sinew. He’d once watched Rooster, piss drunk, tear a guy’s nostril open in a bar scrap. The whole left side of the dude’s nose was blown out, and just

flapped around on his face with each breath after the fight was broken up and Rooster was pulled off.

Tad had plenty of targets of opportunity with Rooster – the small man stank much of the time. He didn't shower most days. He left his chin-up, push-up, and sit-up sweat in place, only bothering to wipe down his tattoos. His red-blond hair hung limp and greasy as well. Then there were the scars. Nasty raised red ones that ran up and down his forearms like someone had gone at him with a boning knife. When Tad finally screwed up the nerve to ask where he'd gotten them, Rooster merely replied, 'Around.' Tad left it there.

'You're just lucky it doesn't stick to you,' Tad repeated, chewing on his own French toast.

'Yeah, I'm lucky,' Rooster said, turned, and looked down the street, still dark beneath all the goddamn trees. 'Should've gone to McDonald's.'

Jamie Gabriel, rider, pedals. He flows by silent houses, houses dark on the inside. He tosses papers into yards and onto porches. He works on his arc and velocity with each throw. An automatic sprinkler quietly sweeps one lawn, still blue in the bruised morning light. Jamie slings for the front door of that house so the paper stays dry. He works his pedals. A line of streetlight goes dark with a hiss as morning comes. Dad thinks it's great that they moved to a neighborhood that supports tradition: newspaper routes. Mom's not so sure – her boy needs his rest. Few people know the streets like Jamie does. Dark and empty, they're his streets. Jamie wasn't so sure either, at first, when he was still getting used to the work and slogging through the route on his old Huffy. But then he earned the new bike. He read an old story of a mailman who became an Olympic biker. *Why not him, too?* He has a picture. The black man's thighs bulge and ripple. He looks like he's set to tear his

bike apart more than ride it. Jamie checks his watch. His time is looking good.

Rooster glanced at the clock inside the Lincoln. Goddamn Lincoln now smelled of an old fuel leak and Tad's farts over the sickly sweet of the aftershave. But the car was clean. Riggi bought it in a cash deal and dropped it off with fixed-up tags. Rooster hated these goddamned pickups. He flexed his forearm, felt the corded muscle move underneath his wounded and roughly healed skin and light red arm hair. His forearm was thick for his stature. He was ripped. He was disciplined with working out, but he was a lazy bastard, he suspected, when it came to certain parts of the job. Yeah, he hated the fucking snatches. Anybody could do 'em. It wasn't like the house work. *That* was rarefied air, sir.

'Start the car,' Rooster said low, glancing sideways at the clock again. He scanned out the windshield of the Lincoln. The goddamn thing was like the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*.

'Oh, shit,' Tad said, his last bite of hash-brown cake sticking in his gullet. The car turned over, coarse and throaty.

They saw movement at the corner.

Jamie puts his head down and digs his pedals. He's got a shot at his record. He's got a shot at the *world* record. He throws and then dips his right shoulder as he makes the corner of Tibbs. The canvas sack on his left has begun to lighten and unbalance him. He straightens the Mongoose and glances up. Car. Dang. Jamie wheels around the corner right into the rusty grill and locks them up.

Tires bite asphalt and squeal. Smoke and rubber-stink roil. Brakes strain hard and hold. The vehicles come to a stop. Inches separate them.

With a blown-out breath of relief, Jamie shakes his head and starts pushing toward the curb, bending down to pick up a few papers that have lurched free.

Car doors open. Feet hit the pavement. Jamie looks up at the sound. Two men rise out of the car. They move toward him. He squeezes the hand brake hard as they approach.

TWO

CAROL GABRIEL PUSHES a strand of dirty blond hair back behind her ear and sips her coffee, Folgers beans, freshly ground, a mellow roast. Her friends like Starbucks, but she finds it bitter and knows they drink it for the name.

She stands in the kitchen and looks out over the sink through the small square window. She's found herself smiling here most days since the move. Especially since fall hit three weeks back with a burst of color on the trees. There's no smile today, even though the day's a bright, shiny thing. Her second cup of coffee has begun to curdle in her belly, as Jamie usually wheels into the driveway before she's done with her first.

Paul walks into the kitchen, a blue rep tie hanging unknotted around his neck. Because he's got his nose in a pamphlet, he bumps into a kitchen chair. The chair groans across the terracotta tile floor and sends a painful report through his knee and up his thigh. Carol looks over at the noise.

Split annuities. Tax-advantaged cash flow and principal protection. How to sell the concept hasn't really stuck yet for Paul, but he's got to get into new products now. He sits, reaches for toast that's gone cold. Variable whole life; yearly contributions to a policy that pays a death benefit but turns into an IRA-type retirement instrument at age sixty-five, is what got him into this neighborhood. He broadened his base, reached a new level of clientele. He

made a solid conservative play and bought a house that he could carry the monthly nut on during his worst month, by virtue of his commissions on those policies alone. Now the plan was to have no worst months.

Paul chews toast. Feeding himself right-handed, he presses his gut with his left. It yields. Thirty-five years' worth. It was a cut slab through age thirty-one, but for the last four years he's let it slide. At six-one, he'd been lean, a runner, for most of his life. Then he got a bone spur on his heel. Doctors recommended he get it cut out, but the surgery meant a long recovery, so he decided to run through it. They said it wouldn't work, that the thorny spur would continue to aggravate the plantar fascia, that it couldn't be done, but he'd gotten the idea it could. Mile after grueling mile he kept on, until something changed and yielded, and the thing wore away to nothing. Then his job did what pain could not and stopped him in his tracks. He started coming home tired in a different way from any manual labor he'd done in his youth. A few scotches a week became a few per night, so he could sleep. That, he suspected, added the first girth layer. He switched to vodka, which helped, but he was out of shape and he knew it.

'Paul, I'm worried.' Carol stands over him. He looks up. A shadow lies across her face. 'Did you see Jamie outside?'

'No. Why?'

'He's not home and I didn't hear him come in from his route.'

'Maybe he left for school early. ...'

Her face radiates a dozen questions back at him, the most pleasant being: What kid goes to school early?

How can a grown man be so damned dumb? It leaps to the front of her mind. She feels guilty for it immediately and pushes it away. But it *had* been there.

'No, you're right,' he says. He gulps coffee, pushes together a pile of insurance pamphlets, and stands. 'Maybe

his bike broke down.' Carol looks at him with doubt, not hope. 'I'm already late, but I'll drive his route and look for him on the way to the office. Call me if he shows up. I want to know why—'

'Call as soon as you see him. Call as soon as you can. I'll try the Daughertys'. Maybe he's over there.'

'Yeah. That's probably it.' Paul gives her a peck and heads for the door. It's like kissing a mannequin.

Mothers know.

Paul's blue Buick LeSabre traverses the neighborhood. Streets that had been empty quiet an hour ago now hum. Minivans tote children to school. Older children pedal in packs. Kids, older still, drive four to a car to the high school. Joggers and dog walkers dot the sidewalks.

Paul coasts up in front of a miniature stop sign held by an aging woman with white hair and an orange sash across her torso. She waves a group of eight-year-olds across the front of the Buick as Paul lowers the window.

'Do you know Jamie Gabriel? Have you seen him?'

'Not by name,' she says, years of cigarettes on her voice. 'I know the faces.'

'Have you seen a paperboy?' Paul asks, wishing he had a picture with him. 'His bike might have broken down.'

'Sure haven't, just kids on the way to school.'

Unsatisfied, Paul nods and drives on. He makes a right on Tibbs. An oil-stained street. Jamie's not there and nothing's out of the ordinary. Not sure what to do next, he drives the rest of the route and then continues to the office.

Rooster sits and sips his morning beer. Overdriven guitar sounds thunder in his head. He'd been playing Mudvayne all morning. He turned it off a minute ago, but can still hear it. He can do that. It is one of many things he can do that others cannot. He's special. He knows he is. But he's not happy. Having gifts is not the same thing as happiness. His

mind roils in simulated guitar fuzz – he doesn't want to think about *in there* – until he hears the van drive up outside.

Tad lumbers out of the panel van clutching a sixer of Blue Ribbon and the reload, the day's second round of food. This time it is McDonald's as directed. He approaches the house, the eyesore of the neighborhood. The paint is falling off in flakes and long curls, and only the windows on the side and those of the room down the hall are freshly painted. Black. It is what they'll call their 'music studio' if anyone asks. But no one does. This is the house the neighbors wish would just go away so property values could rise.

Tad enters, pulling off dark sunglasses and sliding them into the chest pocket of his flannel shirt. The living room is dingy. Carpet that is lentil in color and texture, and secondhand green and orange sofas that have gone decades without a re-covering fill the room.

Fast-food sandwich boxes and wrappers litter a dinette area. Rooster sits on a spindly chair across from a dormant twenty-year-old color television with tinfoil bunny-ears antennae that rests on a milk crate. His eyes are on the dead screen and he rocks slightly in rhythm to music that seems to fill his head from an unknown source. He is shirtless.

'You are one lazy bastard.'

Rooster's eyes don't leave the television as he gives Tad the finger.

'You got no work ethic at all.'

'You speak to Riggi?' Rooster asks as if Tad has just entered the room and the previous comments had never occurred.

'Shiftless. Look at you.'

'I've already been in there two times since you been gone,' Rooster says. Flat. His eyes, also flat, turn to Tad, stopping him up. 'You speak to Riggi?'

'Two times? Bullshit, two times ...' Tad gets his breath back. 'Yeah, I spoke to him.'

'What'd he say?'

Tad puts the beer down among the rubble on the dinette table. He opens one for himself and chucks one over to Rooster.

'Mr. Riggi said he needs it for Thursday.'

Rooster opens the new beer and takes a delicate, probing sip. 'Thursday. Shit.'

'Yeah,' Tad begins, enjoying his partner's discomfort, 'he's got it arranged for Thursday, so you better get cracking.'

'Yeah? *I* should get cracking? Whyn't you take a turn?' This silences Tad for a moment.

'No thanks. You're the pro.'

Rooster nods slightly, pleased, then kicks a pill into the back of his mouth, drains off a few ounces of his beer, and wearily stands. Vicodin. When you're in physical pain, it takes away the pain. When you're not in pain, it takes away other things. He gathers himself and walks purposefully down the hall toward the back bedroom door.

Tad occupies the chair in front of the television, leans forward, and turns on cartoons.

The sound of a lock being undone from the outside and the door opens, allowing a crease of light into the ugly, darkened bedroom. The blacked-out windows are nailed shut and have metal grating over them on the inside. A sheetless bed is the only furniture. Rooster reaches up and tightens a bare lightbulb into its fixture, illuminating the room. Balled up between the bed and the wall is a tearstained, violence-shocked flash of skin. The man's face sets in a mask that expresses neither frenzy nor madness. The boy's face forms its own mask of pain, and fear, and incomprehension, and so far below the surface as to be

invisible, fury. He doesn't even say no but weakly tries to scrabble away from the man.

'Here it comes,' Rooster says. He jerk-steps toward the boy and kicks the door shut.

Out in the living room Tad turns up the volume on the television.

Goddamnit. Where did he put the damned instruction manual for his BlackBerry? Paul sifts through his paperwork-laden desk. The phones outside are busy. He's been programming numbers into the thing for weeks, but now he can't get it to work. His paneled office sports several framed certificates distinguishing him for his efforts as an insurance agent, but they aren't helping him now.

Janine appears at the door. 'Carol on three.' And she disappears again. He had called Carol on the way to work and told her to start looking for Jamie.

'Carol? My BlackBerry just crashed. Did he show up? 'Cause when he does he has some explaining—' Her answer freezes him inside. It's 10:15.

'The police? We can, but I don't know. It seems a little drastic. ...' His gaze goes distant. There's a world full of possibilities out there. But he isn't ready to accept them. Fathers may not want to know.

'If he doesn't show up at his normal time after school ...' He stops. His stomach has soured. Acid churns in it like he's had six cups of coffee on no food.

'No, you're right - I'll come home and we'll deal with it. ... Okay. ... Try not to worry.' But as he hangs up, that's what he has begun to do.

Paul and Carol stand static amid the bureaucratic swirl of the busy police station. Things move slowly for them, incoherently, like a warped videotape caught up in the machine.

They stand and gesture with the beefy desk sergeant.

Later, they sit at the desk of a concerned-looking patrolman, filling out forms, giving him photographs.

Now, waiting, silent, on a wooden bench, Paul holds a dead cup of coffee in one hand and Carol's cold palm in his other. Her features have begun to tighten – it's not possible to see it yet – but she's begun to desiccate and wither on the vine.

Finally. Finally, the concerned-looking patrolman shows them into Captain Pomeroy's small, glass-walled office. Pomeroy, a soft, pillowy man with a prominent nose bone, sits behind his desk. His tie has a silver bar across it. A silver pen and pencil set rests in his shirt pocket. His hair is swept back with Vitalis, his face full of Aqua Velva, his mouth full of nicotine gum.

'Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel, I've looked over your paperwork here, and I just want to assure you that this office will do everything it can to assist you in locating your boy, ahh, James.'

'Jamie' comes through Carol's clenched jaw.

'Jamie.' Pomeroy makes a note. 'Thought it was short for —'

'No, that's his name. It's on his birth certificate.'

'But before we do, before we open this thing up wide, I just want to be sure that this is ... That is, that your boy didn't run off for a—'

'He's missing. I know it. You hear about these things.'

'Ma'am, most mothers ... Look, all I'm saying is to be sure. It's just that boys are known to be boys.'

'What?' It comes out a hoarse croak, as if Paul hasn't used his voice box for years.

'What I'm saying is, often in these types of situation, maybe he had a math test he didn't want to show up for. Or he got a bad grade on that science project and didn't want you to—'

'Not Jamie.'

'Mrs. Gabriel ...' Pomeroy leans back and shifts his holstered automatic against his hip. He looks to Paul in muted demand.

'Honey, I'm sure that's what everybody says about their ...'

'Exactly,' Pomeroy breathes in gratitude, taking over from Paul. 'Hell, he probably just ...'

Hope is a slim branch, and the men do their best to grasp it, but it's a bit overweighted for Carol. Her expression stops Pomeroy.

'I suggest you talk to his teachers.' He manages to start again. 'See if everything was jake at school. Ask his friends ...'

'Fine, we will, but ...' Paul offers.

'Anything you do along those lines will save us legwork.' Pomeroy taps a silver pen against the edge of the desk.

'What are you going to do? What about issuing an alert?'

'We have. We've passed around the information. Okay, ma'am. We'll open it up wide. We'll set up on your house. Your place of business, too. I'll put officers out in the neighborhood canvassing door to door. And I want you to call in the minute your son shows up' – Pomeroy leads them out of the glass-walled office – 'because he's going to.' Pomeroy smiles reassuringly. 'He's going to.' And he shuts the door behind them.

'That man is not going to help us.' Carol's words come, grim. Paul says nothing.

The seasonal switch has been made to Eastern Standard Time, and darkness is coming early in Indiana. The Buick drives up. After long hours of looking, of hanging flyers, Paul steps out of the car, the way he has so many times after picking Jamie up from soccer practice. Paul stands on the driver's side. Carol, after an afternoon of waiting by the phone, appears in the front door. She shakes her head. In the setting sun, Paul is a handsome, still-young father. He

appraises his home of comfort, his still-young wife before it. A police cruiser is parked at the curb. He walks toward the house and she crosses toward him. They come together and cling to each other in the driveway, neither sure what they're holding on to now. The sun drops below the trees.

Paul eats a bleak dinner of cold cereal. Rigged to the phone is a trace/recording device monitored by the two patrolmen outside in their cruiser. Carol sits in a trancelike state next to him. A scratching is heard at the kitchen door. Carol gets up and lets Tater in. His mouth drips blood. She gets a dish towel and wipes him clean. He is uninjured – the blood belongs to something else – and he rumbles off into the living room, excited at the smell of the police sniffer dogs that have been through the house all afternoon. Paul shakes more Lucky Charms into his bowl and the prize falls out.

'He was waiting for this. I'll save it for him.' He puts it aside on the table and breaks down, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

Carol stands across the kitchen. She doesn't go to him. After some time he stops.

'Let's just go up to bed.' He stands. *Maybe we'll wake up tomorrow and find out this was all a bad dream*, he wants to say, but does not.

Paul crosses to the staircase. Carol goes to the wall and turns on the living room and porch lights.

'Let's leave these on in case.' She follows him up the stairs.

The door swings open, throwing light onto the mattress, which the boy has pulled off the bed and angled against the wall over himself like a protective lean-to. Rooster offhandedly tosses a grease-soaked fast-food bag into the room and sniffs to himself at the attempted defense. *Never*

seen that one before. As if it'd work. He slams the door behind him. Again the room is awash in darkness.

* * *

Paul lies on his back in the darkened bedroom, unfeeling of the mattress beneath him. He floats in space defined only by his misery. Grief that he could never have imagined surrounds him and tears at him from every direction. Circumstances pulverize him, sap him motionless in the dark. A dull rumbling sound filters in from the bathroom. There, sitting in a filling tub, Carol thinks of Jamie when he was a three-year-old playing the Down the Drain game, an amusement of his own invention. *Better get the plumber, Mommy, I'm gone. I'm down the drain.* ... Carol's pale back shakes. The water pounds and thunders. She realizes the sound isn't the water but her screams.

Rooster and Tad sit at the cluttered dinette table. Heavy feedback music is in the air and Tad drums along to it.

'So's he gonna be ready?'

Rooster looks at his partner. Tad's recently started smoking meth, and he's on it now. Rooster can tell because Tad has that filthy sheen. It's a dirty drug that opens the pores and seems to suck in airborne dirt and debris. He must've smoked up the last time Rooster was in the room down the hall. Disgusting. 'Of course he's gonna be ready, bitch.'

'Because it's first thing, like fucking dawn on Thursday, you know, asshole?'

Tad has a wild, risky look in his eyes. *Wouldn't be there if not for the meth,* Rooster thinks.

'Yeah, I know, douche bag.' Rooster flicks a bottle cap at him. Just misses the fat fucker.

'Watch it.' Tad moves evasively and too late. 'Just so you're sure, dickhead.'

'I'm a professional, fuck face.' This taunt catches Tad, and he isn't sure where to go next, how to escalate.

'Listen, faggot,' he begins, and then there's a click and a knife blade's at his throat. Rooster's pulled the four-inch Spyderco he carries in his back pocket and locked it back. Just like that. Tad feels the pressure of the blade against his Adam's apple, a hard thin line.

'Don't even say another word. Not sorry, not spit. Hear me?' Rooster's face radiates blood.

Tad Ford nods slowly.

Class has just ended at JFK Middle, and kids stream out toward buses and their parents' cars. Carol Gabriel walks opposite the flow toward the low building and wonders why she's done this to herself and not come later in the afternoon. It has been four days. The police have left her house. Every backpack she sees, every jacket, screams Jamie for a moment before dissolving into a different child. Alex Daugherty walks by her and stops.

'Hi, Mrs. G,' he says.

She bends down. 'Alex. Hi, Alex.' The boy seems to know something's going on but not exactly what. 'You know that Jamie's been away for a couple days?' she goes on. She can't hold herself back from touching him. Her hands reach out and smooth the boy's sleeves, his hair. Her hands, disconnected from her mind, need to know that *this* boy at least is real.

'Yeah.'

'Do you know if he was ... upset? Was everything okay at school and stuff?'

'Yeah. Did he run away?' the boy wonders.

'We don't think so.' The conversation is already taking a toll on Carol. 'He wasn't having any problems that he told you about? He hadn't met anyone? Any secret stuff? Because you should tell me if he did, it's important.'

Alex shakes his head and begins digging at the sidewalk with a toe, when a little way off at the curb his mother honks and gets out of her station wagon.

‘There’s my mom.’

Carol straightens up and trades a glance with Kiki Daugherty, who waves. She’s told Kiki and Kiki’s said all the right things. Carol watches jealously as the other mother collects her child. If there’s any accusation in Kiki’s stare, any ‘What kind of a mother lets this happen to her son?’ she keeps it to herself so Carol can’t see it. Carol hurries toward the school.

Inside Jamie’s homeroom, his teacher, Andrea Preston, a twenty-seven-year-old black woman, hands Carol a cup of coffee.

‘We have assemblies where we teach the children not to talk to strangers or accept rides. And we had one yesterday to redouble—’

‘Yes. Yes.’ Carol’s words echo, disembodied, against the linoleum. ‘Really, Jamie’s old enough to know all that. I just wanted to check again and see if everything was all right here. He was doing fine, wasn’t he?’ There is panic in her voice now. Perhaps nothing was as she thought.

‘He was doing fine. Really well,’ the teacher says slowly, and gives a pained smile, as if to invest the empty words with hidden meaning. ‘A few problems with fractions, nothing out of the ordinary. I wish there was something more.’ Preston’s face searches hers.

Carol realizes how young the teacher is and that she is shattered, too. She feels she should try to comfort the woman, but how? ‘Can I get those things out of his locker?’

The teacher nods.

What passes for lawn in front of the seedy house is purple gray with Thursday-morning frost. Tad sits behind the wheel of a van, an aging Econoline with covered rear

windows, listening to wacky morning radio. He's been keeping his distance from Rooster, who's up on the porch walking back and forth and smoking a cigarette.

An immaculate black Cutlass Supreme with smoked windows and custom t-top rolls up to the house. Out steps a stout man in a slightly shiny, several-hundred-dollar suit. He wears gold and sunglasses and has a bald head. He's Oscar Riggi. He's the man.

Rooster stops pacing.

Tad jumps out of the van and crosses through a cloud of Econoline exhaust. 'Mr. Riggi, how you doin'?'

Tad kisses ass, but Rooster doesn't go for that. He knows he's not so easily replaced.

'Rooster. Tad. How are things? How's our package?'

'Everything's all fine and loaded, sir,' Tad answers, looking involuntarily at the van and thinking instinctively of the carpet-lined cut in the floor. He pats the van's side.

Riggi looks through Tad as if *he's* an exhaust cloud. 'Things went well, I trust, huh, Rooster?'

'Yeah, you can trust, Captain.' Rooster flicks his cigarette butt in Tad's direction. Not at him, but in his direction. It's just far enough off so that Tad can't say anything.

Riggi climbs the few steps up to the porch and flips Rooster a fairly thick roll of small and medium bills rubberbanded together. Rooster thumbs it nonchalantly and tucks it away. Riggi cuffs him behind the head, not without affection.

'Hey, I can count on you, huh?'

'That's right, Oscar.'

Tad comes up to join them, much larger than both men, yet feeble and intimidated in their presence. Without taking his eyes off Rooster, Riggi reaches into his jacket pocket and produces a packet of papers that he hands to Tad.

'There's the address of the other pickup. Instructions on what roads to take. Your destination is in there, too.'

Memorize it, write it in code, whatever, then destroy it. There's travel money in there also.'

Tad stays with it, endeavors to look keen, on top of things. 'Okay, okay.'

'Call me every eight hours regardless of where you are. Got it? I want my phone ringing every eight hours.'

'Got it.'

'Where you gonna call me?'

'Wherever I'm at, eight hours.'

Riggi gives a pinched smile, like he's tasting bad jelly. 'You get the rest of your money when you're back.'

'Yes, sir.'

Riggi nods and turns to him. 'You're still here?'

Tad hustles into the van and drives off. Riggi turns back to Rooster. 'You have breakfast yet?'

THREE

Fourteen Months Later

PAUL GABRIEL POURS a second bowl of cereal. He reaches in and fishes out the prize. It's a rubber astronaut that dropped in water grows to eight and a half times its original size. He puts it with the rest of the prizes he's been saving for his son. There are more than a dozen now. Paul rubs a circle at his temple with his fingertips. He's graying there. He's pale. Tired looking, too.

Paul lowers his spoon. 'Carol? Carol? Are you ready? We should get going.' A moment later she enters the kitchen. Her outfit doesn't do much for her. No makeup; dark circles under her eyes. She crosses the kitchen, which is looking shabby. She pushes a sponge around the countertop and tosses it into a sink full of dishes. Carol stands next to Paul as he changes his mind about the cereal and pours it in the garbage. He has the sensation that he sees the two of them there, as if from above. They look shitty together, the house looks shitty, everything is shitty.

'Okay, let's go.' He sweeps up his keys. She takes a thin folder with Jamie's picture stapled to it, reports and forms protruding slightly from the bottom, and they leave.

The station bustles around them as the Gabriels sit stonelike on their bench outside of Captain Pomeroy's

office. Across the room the concerned patrolman who took their statement so long ago looks over at them. He snaps off the sad look and turns away guiltily. Paul and Carol sit inches apart, but it may as well be light-years. They dwell in private capsules now, each alone, unable to reach out for the other. The only thing they share now is great failure.

They can see Pomeroy in his office, feet up on his desk, conversing with a colleague. The colleague is not a cop, at least he wears no gun, and when he notices the time, he gets up. Pomeroy shows him to the door, and as it opens, his hearty laugh escapes into the waiting area. The Gabriels eye him accusatorily; they haven't laughed like that in some time. Upon seeing the Gabriels, Pomeroy claps up.

'Okay, Jase, we'll finish this later. Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel, how are you? Come on in, let's review.'

They enter his office. Paul and Carol take seats and Pomeroy plunks himself down, wearily now, behind his desk, sighing deeply. 'I tell you, things are not quiet around here. Never too quiet.'

He riffles through several manila folders and comes up with his copy of the file with a picture of Jamie Gabriel stapled to the cover. Pomeroy dons a pair of plastic-rimmed reading glasses and skims the case much like a merchant reviewing an account. His lips skip and mumble along with his eyes, his volume low. 'Case estab'd Oct. 24 ... Fourteen months ... Last seen, night before ... No evidence struggle. Area disappearance: Auburn Manor neighborhood, Wayne T'ship. Exact unknown. Listed: Miss Pers Bureau, Nat Cent of Missing and Exploited ... Children of Night ... Proj Shelter ... Runaway Hotline ... Angel Find ... Cross-listed with State Police, Sheriff's Dept., and Federal Bureau—'

'Do you have any new information? Anything?'

Pomeroy doesn't acknowledge hearing the question and continues to scan for another moment. He pushes up his glasses and gives a finger massage to the bridge of his

nose. 'As you can see by your copy of the report, we haven't been able to develop any hard leads yet.'

'What are you people doing about it currently?'

'I want to assure you, the case is still active. In these situations, missing youths, runaways ...'

'He's not a runaway.' Carol's words come out weak, nearly exhausted. Only thin anger fuels them along. 'Can't you just understand that? All you've done is send his picture to shelters. He knows his way home if he had run away. But he can't get home, because somebody took him. He's been taken.' The last word still cuts through Paul like a dentist's drill finding a nerve.

'We haven't found evidence to suggest that. Neither has the Federal Bureau. Yes, it is a possibility. A probability. These things happen, but often these youths don't want to be found.'

'Bullshit,' Paul says. He can't believe he's said it aloud to a policeman.

Pomeroy looks at him in surprise. Behind Carol's pain-glazed eyes there is a stirring as she looks at her husband, a spark. She glimpses what she's been missing for so long. But it fades too quickly.

'Look, Captain Pomeroy, I'm sorry. ... I know you've been working on it, it's just ...' Paul runs out of what to say.

Pomeroy's mouth spreads into a sickly crescent as his customary control drifts back across the desk to his side.

'I understand what you're going through. We're using best efforts to—' He is cut off by a female detective poking her head in.

'Scuse me, Captain, A-2 task force needs you to sign off on this watch so they can go home.'

Pomeroy leaps up, grateful for the interruption. 'I'm sorry, folks, this will just take a minute.' He follows the detective out into the main squad room.

As he exits, Carol looks after him and then gets up and goes behind his desk. This makes Paul nervous.

‘What are you doing?’

She opens Pomeroy’s file on Jamie and starts looking through it.

‘Carol, honey, what if he sees you?’

‘I don’t care. I want to know what they’re really doing.’

‘Carol—’

She looks up, raw. ‘He’s our son. Do you remember him?’

He doesn’t respond to this, anger freezing his face.

Her head drops down as she reads the file. Then she looks up again. ‘Oh, god.’

‘What is it?’ he asks, glancing out to see if Pomeroy is on his way back.

She doesn’t answer, but as she reads her face contorts, as if she’s suffering deep internal bleeding.

‘There’s some kind of man-hour log in his file. Work hasn’t been done on the case in weeks – weeks. Oh, god ...’ Her finger scans the page. The door swings open and Captain Pomeroy steps back into the office. Moving hurriedly behind his desk, he takes the file out of Carol’s hands.

‘Excuse me, Mrs. Gabriel, but this is department property. And confidential.’

She holds up her own version of the Jamie file. ‘What the hell is this, then?’ She slams it down on the desk. ‘A joke apparently—’

‘That’s a copy of certain information that you requested, a request that we granted, although we didn’t have to. It’s not our policy to do so.’

Paul moves in his seat. He feels the weakness of his position. If this man harbors ill will against them, then nothing will be done. He attempts to defuse the situation.

‘Car, you know we have to be patient. An investigation like this is difficult.’

‘Exactly,’ Pomeroy says, retaking his seat in a territorial manner. ‘You know that from your private efforts. And we

know it because the FBI's skunked, too.'

'Time? Time?' Carol shouts, starting to unravel. 'There have been twenty-two and a half man-hours logged on the case, total. Not even two hours for every month he's been gone.'

This stops Paul cold. 'What?' he bleats.

Pomeroy looks embarrassed.

All the calculations start to add up for them: Jamie's age when he disappeared. How old he would be now. How little time has been spent looking for him.

'Read it for yourself,' she croaks. Carol grabs the folder out of Pomeroy's hands and flings it across the office to her husband.

Papers fill the air and then settle.

Pomeroy pulls himself up. 'Mrs. Gabriel, you may not want to accept it, but there are other cases that this department is dealing with. Right now, for instance, I have —'

At this, Carol loses her composure and rushes out of the office, slamming the door loudly behind her and running through the squad room.

The men look at each other. Pomeroy shrugs. *If the guy didn't have a gun on to show he was a cop, he couldn't sell you on the idea*, Paul thinks.

Paul takes his copy of the Jamie file and exits after his wife.

* * *

Patrolman Carriero glanced up at the sound of the door slamming. His heavy brows knit in concern at the sight of a slight, bent woman rushing from Captain Pomeroy's office. He recognized her but couldn't grab her name. A moment later the husband came out. Tall guy. Worried looking. Gabriel. He'd taken their statement ... a long damn time ago. Missing kid. He sat on their house the first night and