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NOAH HAWLEY

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International bestselling author of *Before the Fall*

Anthem

A Novel

Noah
Hawley



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For Guinevere and Lev. Do your best please.

Author's Note

This book contains math. Not calculus or trigonometry—no dense columns of equations—but numbers arranged in order, divided or multiplied, added or subtracted. You will find the odd fraction, the occasional % or \$. The math in question is employed—like all symbols in this book—to convey ideas. For example: A century is made up of 100 years. A year is made up of 365 days. There are 24 hours in a day. We use these numbers ($24 \times 365 \times 100$) to measure human history. And yet few of the bipedal animals we call human beings live for 100 years. Statistically, the life span for an average male living in the United States of America is 72.4 years. The average American female lives 76.6 years. In Congo, men can expect to live to 55.7. In China the typical woman will make it to 66.3. This is the math of our existence.

At the time of this writing, I, the author, am 53 years old, which means I was born in 1967, a little over half a century ago. A half century before my birth was the year 1917.

$\frac{1}{2}$ century + $\frac{1}{2}$ century = 1 century.

That is an objective measure of time. But time is subjective, which is why, as I age, the year 1917 seems more and more like ancient history. A long, long time ago: before the treaty of Versailles and the end of the first World War, before Influenza killed 22 million people worldwide, before prohibition, before the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, before big band and swing music, before the Second World War and the

Korean War, before the birth of rock and roll and the British Invasion, before Elvis, before the Cold War and the Kennedy Assassination, before Levittown and the rise of the middle class, before a chicken in every pot, before mechanization, before television, before penicillin.

53 + 53 = a different era, in other words.

Logic would dictate, then, that the year 1967 must—to most non-53-year-old human beings today—also feel like ancient history. Before *peace with honor* ended the Vietnam War, before the Summer of Love and the Manson murders, before Watergate, before the Great Recession of the 1970s, before the Reagan revolution and trickle-down economics, before the personal computer and the internet, before the first George Bush presidency and the second, before globalization, before the ATM, before the Clinton impeachment and the Obama presidency, before the cell phone, the tablet, before Siri and Alexa, before the global financial crash, before the gig economy, before the resurgence of nationalism, before the 45th president, before COVID-19, before Apple, before Google, before Amazon.

Before most things we consider to be modern. In summation—
1967 = ancient history.

Realizing this makes your author feel old, old, old. Or, as his mother might say—

Boo phooey.

The phrase *boo phooey* comes from a children's book the author's mother used to read to him in his youth. The book was called *The Thing in Dolores' Piano*. It was the story of young Dolores who played the piano so terribly that the *Do* note came out and begged her to stop. When she wouldn't, the *Do* note locked the keyboard.

Dolores couldn't play a single note.

But Dolores was eight and refused to surrender to the will of others. She followed the *Do* note back inside the piano, moving from room to room, encountering all the other notes (*fa, so, la, ti*), demanding they release her piano to her so she could play. Each note refused. Dolores felt an unfamiliar emotion; despair. It was a feeling she rejected, as any strong-willed child would. Inside a pitch-black room,

Dolores discovered something. A note so monstrous the other notes had locked it away. *Aha*, thought Dolores, who knew an advantage when she saw one. She threatened to let the monster out unless the other notes unlocked her keyboard, unless they surrendered to her will. The monster was horrible. The monster was terrifying. The other notes had no choice but to concede. They unlocked the piano. Dolores had won. She returned to the outside world and resumed her assault on music itself.

At which point a chorus of voices rose from the piano. They shouted as one. And what they shouted was—

Boo phooey.

By which they meant, *We don't like the way this story has ended. You were a bad sport and a bully. You forced your will on us, and we don't think that's right.* By which they meant, *Life is unfair.*

The author's son says this a lot. He too is eight. *That's not fair*, he says. By which he means, *I didn't get what I wanted.* Or, *My sister got to do something that I didn't.* This idea of fairness exists nowhere else in the animal kingdom. The dinosaurs went extinct, and none of them said *boo phooey*. The last dodo passed from the face of the Earth, and none of them said *boo phooey*. All around us, the honeybees are fading from existence, the frogs are vanishing. Neither species gives their fate a bitter thought.

Imminent danger they understand. *Mortality* is beyond them.

We discuss their lives and deaths in terms of numbers. Three thousand African elephants remain in the wild, two hundred snow leopards. Each death is an act of subtraction. Each birth an act of addition.

Be fruitful and multiply, God told Moses.

Divide and conquer, said the generals.

You do the math.

Now, your author understands that math is not why readers read novels. He asks your indulgence and your patience and promises that there is more to this story than numbers. There is drama. There is catharsis. Everywhere you look in this book, you will find people. People in need. People who want what you want—to feel safe, to be loved, to

Author's Note

do unto others as they would have others do unto them. Each of their deaths is an act of subtraction.

This is their story. And if you don't like it, your author encourages you to put the book down and shout—

Boo phooey.

Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can
make you commit atrocities.

—Voltaire

“I had my hand on a metal baseball bat, just in
case,” said Nate, twelve. “Cause I was going to go
down fighting if I was going to go down.”

—*New York Times*, May 9, 2019

Anthem

Before

The Nadirs

There they are, America's future. Alone at first, then all together.

PS29, Brooklyn. The hushed reverence of boredom commonly known as a children's recital. It's 6:00 p.m. on a Thursday. The elementary school auditorium is like a chapel, a nondenominational holy space where adults congregate to worship the promise of their young. Piano, piano, dance troupe, Mozart violin screech, inappropriately suggestive pop ballad, ginger magician. It's April 2009, and the stock market is spiraling. Parents sit on folding chairs, trying to shake off the muffled outrage of their commute long enough to experience the emotional transcendence of *actually being present*, while at the same time recording young Sasha or Liam or Nicole's musical efforts onto a digital medium, never to be seen again. Beside them, older siblings slump, locked in the broad Kabuki of their tedium. Peppered through the crowd, clots of younger siblings fidget and whine, feet dangling, caught in the witching hour of their bedtime. They are two kinds of difficult—jittery from hurried car snacks or slumped in butter noodle lethargy.

The stock market fell 325 points today. It will fall 325 more tomorrow. You can smell the panic in the air.

Judge Margot Nadir sits fourth row center with her second husband, Remy. There is a sculpted plastic infant carrier on the seat next to him. Inside, their ten-month-old son is sleeping, for now, chirping his somnolent baby nonsense. That constant runner of gasps and clucks,

what the judge and her husband have come to realize for young Hadrian are simply the sounds of being alive.

Judge Nadir. It is a term of address she is still getting used to, having been appointed to the federal bench late last year following a high-profile career as an assistant US attorney in lower Manhattan. Now—instead of battling traffic every morning in sneakers, her dress shoes stuffed inside her tote—she dons the robes at Cadman Plaza, *hear ye, hear ye*, the newest distinguished justice of the US District Court for the Eastern District—having been transported from their apartment in Brooklyn Heights in an official black car.

After years of advocating a position, her opinions are now recorded as law. She has become *the Decider*. It is a power they joke about at home—Remy reminding her she’s only called *your honor* at work. *At home*, he says, *we make decisions together*. And she smiles and says *of course*, because she wants him to feel heard. They are still in the honeymoon phase of their marriage. Twenty-two months. Thirty if you add in the courtship. Long enough to cohabitate and have a baby but not long enough to learn all the tier-one secrets.

It is the second marriage for her, the first for him. Remy arrived with a record collection. She came with a six-year-old daughter.

Onstage the curtain flutters, nervous third and fourth graders peering out through the gap. Judge Nadir unfolds the paper program handed to her on the way in by a young girl in a wheelchair. She scans the list of names, finds her daughter, Story, who turned nine on Saturday. She’s listed first of twelve. A wave of relief passes over the judge. Maybe they can slip out before the medley from *Phantom of the Opera* and make it home in time for some kind of decent meal. The judge has an opinion to finish tonight, and she doesn’t want to be up until all hours writing.

The People v. Gary Fey. Tax evasion and money laundering. It’s what people with money do these days. Invent a latticework of shell companies and funnel their millions offshore. Divorce among the rich has become a matter of international intrigue.

Remy reaches over and squeezes her hand.

“Good day?” he says.

“You know—” she says, meaning there’s too much to say about the weight of the world in this place, at this time.

He nods, takes a lollipop from his pocket, unwraps it. Remy has a low blood sugar affliction—not diabetes but diabetes adjacent. Rather than seek medical supervision, he has devised a self-care plan that seems sketchy at best, something people on the internet swear by. Margot doesn’t like it, but part of marriage is looking the other way when your spouse engages in patterns of questionable behavior, so as to *accept the other person for who he is*.

They came separately, she and Remy—Margot from the courthouse and he from home, giving himself time to stop for a much-needed cup of coffee. Before leaving the apartment on Pineapple Street, he did the OCD pat—wallet, keys, phone—and then, slinging his semi-masculine baby bag over his shoulder, he stepped out into the early-fall chill, lugging Hadrian’s rear-facing car seat and snapping it into the Nordic stroller, hearing that satisfying mechanical *clatch*.

Together they headed out past the playground and the promenade, working their way south on Henry. Remy waited for the light at Atlantic Avenue, even as others jaywalked, aware that he is a Black man pushing a \$1200 stroller in an affluent white neighborhood. Light-skinned, but still—a Black man on foot in the Heights.

The baby, on the other hand, was dark skinned enough at birth to have given Remy pause. A wild thought went through his head in the hospital nursery—*did my wife have an affair with a Black guy?*—before realizing that the Black guy was, in fact, *him* and that his son’s coloring must have been a recessive gene passed down from his mother’s side. At that moment, a seed of worry was planted inside him, a worry unfamiliar to white parents. Because, though there is a Black man in the White House these days, it doesn’t make his son safe. The signs read HOPE, after all. Not EXPECT or DEMAND. As if the promise of a better world could still be discussed only in the language of dreams.

In the auditorium, Remy pulls the blanket up over the baby and tucks it into the corners of the space-age pod. He is still getting used to this. To being a husband, a father, a stepfather, still getting used to being a

federal judge's spouse, a position that arrived with background checks and routine threat briefings. If you asked him what he does, he would say he is a writer, working on a book about William F. Buckley, father of modern conservatism. But the truth is, he is a stay-at-home dad with a writing problem.

They belong to the party of Lincoln, he and Margot. She a Stanford grad and he a product of George Washington University, raised by a union plumber and a registered nurse, both believers in the struggle, supporters of a safety net. And yet something about the community he grew up in felt aggrieved and self-pitying, this constant lamenting about how *the man was keeping a brother down*. Remy wanted his street to be safer, his classmates to be more respectful. Opportunity, wealth, prestige, these were his ideals. He rejected the burden of history he was told he had to shoulder, replacing it with the mythos of personal achievement. Today Remy believes that his success is a product of individual effort. He made good choices. He worked hard. Everything else is just an excuse.

In the center aisle, a family of three arrives late, sidestepping the row to their seats. Remy plays pickup basketball with the husband a couple of times a week, and they nod to each other the way men do. The crowd is at fever pitch now, a white noise of voices—child sopranos laughing and sharing screens, investment banker father's whiskey-sweating through their shirts, engaged in a denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance spiral with their cell phones, the younger kids running and playing, deaf to the worry on their parents' faces.

The lights flash, signaling the event is about to get underway. People move to take their seats. A group of unvaccinated third graders clamber down the aisle to join their renegade families. They are biologically unprepared for mumps or measles, chicken pox or rubella, but anecdotally free from the whispered threat of autism.

Everybody has a theory, Judge Nadir has come to believe. A conviction, dogged and tenacious, which they refuse to surrender. This is the American way. We have home remedies we swear by, superstitions we will not renounce. We are optimists or pessimists, trusting or suspicious. We confirm our theories online. The internet, invented to “democratize

information,” has turned out, instead, to be a tool of self-affirmation. Whether you believe you’re suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome or that 9/11 was an inside job, the World Wide Web exists to tell you you’re right.

You are always right.

It is making the laws harder to enforce, Margot has noticed. Lately she has found an increasing number of defendants who refuse even to recognize the authority of the court. They talk about the Fourteenth Amendment, about the facade of the federal government. *What qualifies judges and lawyers to say what’s legal and illegal, what’s right and wrong?* Like some kind of Kafka meets Abbott and Costello routine. *Every American*, they write in their self-defended briefs, *is an institution, a judge capable of deciding for themselves what path to follow, what truth to believe.*

Which, while existentially true, is not how society works. And certainly not how the American judicial system—with its tiers of law enforcement, lawyers, judges, prisons, and parole officers—was designed to function.

The curtain opens. Miss Cindy comes out onstage, smiling nervously. She thanks them for coming and shills the bake sale upcoming.

“Just a reminder,” she says, “that there’s no school next Thursday or Friday for parent-teacher conferences.”

A collective groan rises from the crowd—the involuntary sound of adults who have neglected something critical, in this case scheduling childcare for unprotected workdays. Before Miss Cindy’s even finished, smartphones have appeared, screens lighting up, messages of desperation sent into the void.

“And now please welcome Story Burr-Nadir.”

And then Miss Cindy is gone and young Story steps out onto the stage.

There she stands, willowy and blond, with her impossible blue eyes and effortless human grace. Looking at her, Margot realizes she’s holding her breath. A nine-year-old girl is a weightless butterfly—hair brushed imperfectly, adult teeth still too big for the mouth—and yet possessing a rare, fleeting beauty, like a newborn colt, legs comically long, but walking immediately, miraculously. So many critical systems are still forming

for girls of this age, the paper-thin wings of their identity. Story is on the small side, just eyes and a smile. She is a hater of dresses, freckles beginning to emerge from beneath the down of her skin. Her blond hair will turn brown one day, surrendering to genetics, but for now she wears a golden mane, her bangs blunt cut with construction scissors to a length (short) that still makes her mother cringe.

She steps into the light. It's clear from the microphone and piano accompaniment that she will be singing, but the song isn't listed in the program. Nor, Margot realizes, does she know exactly what her daughter has chosen. There was talk of a recent pop ballad, then talk of an old folk number, but in all the hurry of the day-to-day, mother and daughter disconnected on this one critical issue. Like a Halloween costume unmade.

And yet here she is, about to sing.

Watching her, Margot experiences a moment of dislocation, a sudden vertigo of distance, as if her nine-year-old daughter has unexpectedly become a stranger—an individual with a mind of her own, a life of her own (her own theories). And then the accompanist plays middle C and Story begins to sing.

“O say can you see, by the dawn’s early light?”

Silence. And then—like a wildfire—as it becomes clear that Story Burr-Nadir is, in fact, singing the national anthem, parents spring to their feet. Military veterans and sports fans first, but the ascension spreads—most rising with legitimate patriotism, but some from a sense of obligation. Some even with resentment—I *just sat down*. Others with irony—*patriotism is so Midwestern*.

“—what so proudly we hailed, at the twilight’s last gleaming.”

Judge Nadir stands as if lifted. She stands the way the hair on the back of her neck stands, raised by a sudden wind of superstition—superstition in its purest, Old Testament form, a hallowed wave of *rightness*. As if this moment—in which her daughter has decided to give voice to the war-torn hopes of a new nation—combined with the surprise of hearing her sing it for the first time, has created a synchronicity of deep spiritual meaning. It is not a voluntary feeling. Not an intellectual choice. The

judge spends her days sitting on a dais before an American flag. She herself is an American institution—*Her Honor*—steeped in the power and history of symbols.

“—*whose broad stripes and bright stars*—”

Later, they will eat ice cream on the promenade and watch construction crews on the night shift prepare the waterfront for the parks to come. They will laugh about Clive and his overweight Michael Jackson impersonation, and *wasn't Hannah's voice pretty*. As he bounces Hadrian in his arms, Remy will reenact the way Malcolm kept pulling up his pants. It is the first warm night of April. Families from all over the neighborhood are out on the streets. The traffic on the BQE has quieted. They eat mint chocolate chip and raspberry sorbet with rainbow sprinkles. Margot can't stop talking about how proud she is, how surprised she was.

“Did you see everybody standing?” she says.

“They had to stand, Mom,” says Story. “It's the national anthem.”

Margot meets her husband's eye and smiles. He smiles back, feeling both restless and content. *Content* because the idea of America when absorbed through imagery or idealistic song brings an almost overwhelming sense of identity, of belonging. A swell of national wonder. And *restless* because feelings are not facts, and the desire to belong, to *be* something, doesn't make that dream come true.

Hope.

From the promenade they can see the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. They can see kids on scooters and kids on bikes. They can hear the happiness of boys on swings, vaulting up into the twilight, their feet kicking—*higher, higher*. It is the hour after dinner, when all the nannies have gone home for the night, when families cleave together with the illusion of permanence. A parent will always be a parent. A child will always be a child. Like a warm breeze that brings with it the feeling that happiness is a temperature.

Everything is all right. *Mommy's here.*

You don't have to worry. *Daddy's got you.*

As if time itself wasn't devouring every second, propelling the young toward old age and the elderly toward death. As if the parents themselves

weren't once children, clinging to their own parents' legs. And their parents weren't toddlers themselves a few decades before. As if any moment could last forever, caught in midair, like a single note trembling without beginning or end, like

the home of the—

brave.

Book 1

Slow Violence

Now

The summer our children began to kill themselves was the hottest in history. Around the globe, the mercury soared. We argued about this, of course, on news networks and in op-eds, talking heads from both sides—their likenesses beamed to gas station flat-screens and airplane seatbacks—debating the definition of *heat*, of *history*, some arguing that the very idea of measuring temperature itself was a liberal ploy. Meanwhile, tornadoes plowed furrows through Midwestern cities, and sales of mobile air conditioners sparked riots in cities like Oslo and Reykjavík. This is who we had become by then, people who gathered in the rain, arguing over whether or not they were getting wet.

No one can say with certainty whose child was the first to go. Suicide, while tragic, has never been exactly rare among teenagers and young adults. We tend to think of it as a local phenomenon—house by house, community by community. A playground peppered with stunned faces, school flags lowered to half-mast. Like any variation on death, we measure it in tears. Mothers and fathers hollowed out by grief, oblivious to the horns of other motorists as they idle at crosswalks long past green. Counselors brought in to minister to the existential heartbreak of friends and loved ones. *Why would they do that? Why couldn't I stop them? What else could we have done?* All the fundamental questions of human existence born from a solitary, self-annihilating act.

And something else. Fear.

Suicide, you see, is an idea. And like any idea, it can spread from person to person to person. Anyone who has ever stood at a great height and felt the impulse to jump recognizes the draw. And what is adolescence if not a great height from which we are all expected to jump? A precipice of hormones and doubt, of alienation and longing. No longer a child. Not yet grown. Trapped in the pain of becoming.

But what if you could make the pain stop?

What if the answer was not to endure the transition and all its adjacent misery but to end it?

After all, what lies at the end of adolescence if not the future? And as one pundit said on CNN recently, *The future isn't what it used to be*. We had surrounded ourselves with technological miracles, but all they did was show us how primitive the human meat between our ears still was. Our problems had become Stone Age once more. Superstition, tribalism, et cetera.

A11.

A single spark can start an inferno. Or it can flare harmlessly, like a firefly.

The difference is oxygen, kindling, and luck.

And the oxygen in this case was the contagiousness of ideas, the awful *stickiness* of self-murder that most of us failed to understand in that critical first wave. We were living in the age of the meme, after all. Children pledging themselves to Slender Man, leading their classmates into the mossy woods, kitchen knives in hand.



The Carpenters of Madison, Wisconsin, were the ones that people noticed first. On May 15, young Brad Carpenter, sixteen, fashioned a noose from an extension cord and hanged himself in the attic of the three-story Edwardian his parents had renovated six years earlier. His mother found him dangling, a stack of his underwear, laundered and folded, in her hands. Two days later, Todd Billings, seventeen, captain of the ski team, put a plastic bag over his head at the exact moment that Tim

O'Malley, fifteen, mathlete, sliced a vein, then another, bleeding out into the bathroom sink. All were firstborn sons. Each drove a hand-me-down car. Todd died with his braces on. Brad's last regret was that he wouldn't live to see his acne clear up.

Each had written somewhere near the scene of their death the symbol *A11*.

What did it mean? Why those numbers, that letter?

In the next eight days, three more teenagers in Madison would die by their own hand—concern rising to panic among parents in the area. Wisconsin residents took to watching their children while they slept. They suggested that younger kids potty with the door open. Three counties over, the homecoming queen swallowed a bottle of pills, washing them down with vodka and Red Bull. At the southwestern tip of the state, five girls on the swim team made a suicide pact and jumped from the city hall clocktower.

CNN took notice. The *New York Times* published an exposé. Mental health professionals held hurriedly scheduled town halls, answering questions from corralled teenagers and their parents. People took to crossing themselves whenever their children left the room. Twitter and Facebook put headers on their homepages, listing phone numbers you could call. But still, we thought of suicide as a local phenomenon, even as we admitted that technology may have increased its reach.

In Travis County, Texas, Nadine Ort came home from work and found her sixteen-year-old daughter with a garbage bag over her head. The next morning Nadine's hair had turned from gray to white. Around the country, strangers held each other in public, crying until they were numb.

Delaware was next. Hawaii. On May 21 there was a cluster of twenty-five in Nebraska. A week later, forty-three teenagers killed themselves across the state of Missouri. If there were an emoji for this growing crisis, it would be the openmouthed scream. Newspapers filled with photographs of parents falling to their knees, their lips spread in an impossible O. All that nail-biting work, the investment of time, love, money. The sheer willpower it took to keep our children from suffocating in their

cribs, from running into traffic, all those nights felting costumes for the school play, the hours spent driving them to playdates, hosting sleepovers, all the tears, the fights, pushing them to do their homework, the extra-curriculars, soccer Saturdays, the onset of adolescent hormones, voices changing, hair growing on private areas, taking and retaking SAT prep courses, all the bullies and broken hearts. All of it wiped away with little more than a gesture.

Those of us yet untouched saw footage of their windy funerals and held our kids closer. We felt their foreheads and asked if they were feeling okay. We smelled their breath and looked at their eyes under bright lights. Was it drugs? Were they sad? Hopeless? They shrugged us off—teenagers to the end—and said they were fine. Some, though, broke down crying, racked with nerves, tired of fighting, drawn toward the ledge of some dark mystery—like sailors caught in a whirlpool, sucked down into the depths.

We held them and wept, fear building in our hearts.

Things were picking up speed.

In the next few weeks, when the trend had become first national, then global, we scoured the internet for theories. We read the news and analyses, as if our children's lives depended on it, which, of course, they did. We hushed our spouses on the way to supermarkets, turning up the radio whenever we heard the words *cry for help*. We read articles about the terrible costs of cyberbullying, about the perils of sexting. But these were but trees in a forest we couldn't yet see.

A11. What could it mean? Why did it keep appearing in suicide notes, scrawled on walls, written on bathroom mirrors in blood?

Three of the president's cabinet secretaries lost a child in early June. And just like that, the national number reached one thousand kids a day. Movie stars recorded PSAs. High school classrooms took on a visible tension. Op-eds were written—*Is this the end?* It was, of course, just a few years earlier that the COVID-19 plague had swept the planet, locking us in our homes, dooming the elderly and the infirm to panicked suffocation, spurring the almost-civil war, the flashpoint of a brewing culture clash, where the word *mask* became an invocation or an insult.

Now we had to wonder, had the “Lost Year,” that endless lockdown our children endured, had long-term mental health effects—all that computer schooling, the chronic fear of falling behind academically, socially, the endless months of heightened anxiety and uncertainty? But there was no way to know for sure, enmeshed as those factors were with “Stop the Steal” and the Big Lie, which had turned the country into a nation with two presidents—one legitimate and the other not—where QAnon shamans peeled back the layers of an invisible, untraceable fraud and patriots beat police officers with flagpoles. Our histories had been revised recently to highlight the stories of all Americans. Now they were being revised again in state houses across the country, angry crowds roiling at school board hearings, demanding a more patriotic curriculum. And so new textbooks were issued decreeing that accusations of racism were now themselves racist. This was who we had become, a nation of symbolic acts, where what “we” believed and what “they” believed were not just contrary, but opposite. Up is down; black is white. This final fracture of reality had given birth to an existential riddle: What skills must our children master to survive in a world where reality itself is polarized? Had this impossible struggle driven them mad?

Is that what A11 was supposed to mean?

Whatever the cause, we were reeling from a new plague now, a plague of surrender. A plague of fatigue. Conversation in public places stopped when teenagers arrived. No one knew what to say to their own children, let alone the children of others.

On May 25, finals began on college campuses around the country. Aggressive new policies were instituted. Harvard and Yale insisted on nightly inspections of all dorms, administrators looking for pills, blades, anything that could be used to aid in self-extermination. And yet each morning dozens more bodies were discovered. By the twenty-seventh, universities across the country closed, parents flying in on red-eyes, racing cross-country in Volvos to rescue their young.

Each child is precious, unique, but once the phenomenon became widespread, their deaths became a statistic. We began to think of our children as a collective. To talk about them as a *generation*, desperate for

some kind of lightning-strike insight. They *were* less connected, we told ourselves, to each other, to us, while conversely being more connected to the constant flow of misinformation that had become our society. Today's teenagers were having sex later. They were going out less, spending less time with their friends—less *physical* time—while staying connected to them electronically close to twenty-four hours a day. Was this a lingering vestige of the pandemic, or had some kind of deep fear of their fellow man settled in their bones, robbing them of the desire to touch? Was that the problem, a chronic sense of dislocation, a fatal remove, or something more immediate, a hidden trigger we couldn't see? We turned to our priests for answers, to our rabbis and imams, to statisticians and social scientists. They told us that rates of depression and anxiety disorders had been on the rise for years. Why were we just noticing now?

And yet to say that any of this was the cause of their deaths was speculation at best. A fumble in the dark. A way to comprehend the incomprehensible. Some said it was God's will, others the work of his counterpart who resides deep in the fiery pit. Liberals pointed to elevated environmental toxins, to algae blooms in the Atlantic, to leaching plastics, even as the talking heads of right-wing media denied that suicide was a problem. They saw it as a false flag operation—even as their own children began to eat the gun, in a loop of cause and effect that would seem ironic if it weren't so tragic.

In the end all that mattered was that we were their parents.

It was our job to keep them safe, to make them happy, to keep them alive.

In June the phenomenon expanded. Young adults up to age twenty-five were declared *at risk*. Children as young as twelve. Parents took their kids' phones and tablets and smashed them with hammers. They canceled their social media accounts. Televisions were moved to the garage, newspaper subscriptions canceled. If this were a wildfire, we would starve it of oxygen, instituting blackout conditions. Still the death rate climbed, crossing oceans. Europe was first, then Russia and China. Financial markets nosedived. In July, Major League Baseball canceled the rest of the season.

With a virus, you could inoculate. You could isolate. You could watch for physical symptoms. But this—this was something heretofore unseen in human existence. An act of collective surrender. It felt to many of us as if the species itself was giving up. We took to sleeping in bed with our grown children, watching their chests rise and fall, listening for their breath, as if they were babies once more.

Help us, we prayed in the midnight silence. But to who? And why did no one answer?