

1

The bus heading down from upstate says PETER PAN on the side. It might as well say LOSERS. Everyone on here is some combination of bad adjectives: poor, old, sick, bloated, and worse. I've pegged one as homicidal and another as suicidal. Luckily, they're not sitting next to each other. No one on here is getting the better of things. No one owns a car or can afford a train ticket. I fit right in, a sixteen-year-old being shipped across the state in the middle of the night with absolutely no say in the matter.

I'm staring out the window at headlights, taillights, and streetlights, and I've got double stop signs up. My earbuds are in and the old-school punk music is at maximum volume, and I've got a book on my lap so I can pretend to read, if necessary. It's not. The old guy next to me hasn't said a word, and I think he might have wet himself.

We finally pull into the station in Brantley. This is the last stop for me. I slide by the old dude, maintaining as much airspace as possible. The first word I say to him is "Sorry." Then I stand in the aisle and wait as the line shuffles slowly toward the door. Most of these people are continuing on to an actual city. They just want to buy snacks, smoke, use a real bathroom, or get some air. I don't

mind the wait. I'm almost home. I've been counting the days for months, but now I feel more nervous than anything.

The air is warmer out in the parking lot, and I start to come around a little. The compartment doors are open along the side of the bus, and I paw through the luggage until I find my bag. Just to be sure, I give it a quarter turn so I can see the JD in marker on the front. My name is Jimmer Dobbs, but I go by JD if I can help it.

The bag is pretty heavy, but I lift it clear without too much trouble. I take a look around the parking lot, scanning for my mom's Honda, but I don't see it. I pull out my phone and check for a text or a call. There's nothing, so I head inside the station.

I claim one of the orange plastic bucket seats in the waiting area. I check my phone and look around. The station is too big for this dried-up town now. Most of the people here are either from the bus I came in on or they work here.

I'm kind of hungry, but there's a line at the vending machines. The people are looking over their shoulders, afraid the bus is going to leave them here. I check my phone again and wait. It's not like I expected a parade or a party, but I thought my mom would at least be here. I called her once I saw the first exit sign to let her know. The trip in from Stanton is like twenty minutes.

The people get their Snickers or Twix or barbecue potato chips and get back on the bus, and the bus does its part and leaves. Maybe I'll call her again, just to check in. I want to go to the vending machines, but I'm not sure about leaving my bag here and it feels lame to take it with me.

I take it anyway. I'm stranded in a bus station. Lameness is unavoidable, and if I didn't want this stuff, I wouldn't have carted

it to the edge of the state and back. I hook the strap over my shoulder and start walking toward the machines. I hear one of the doors *shoosh* open when I'm halfway across the floor. I look over and it's my mom. I change direction and head toward her.

"Hey, baby bird," she says. Mom calls me that sometimes. I wish she wouldn't.

"Hi, Mom," I say, smiling for the first time in recent memory.

We rarely hug, which guarantees that this one will be awkward, and it is.

"Welcome back," she says.

"Whoop-de-doo," I say, spinning my finger in a little circle around the dingy bus station.

We're mostly quiet on the drive home. I've been away all summer, and even though she visited a few times, there's almost too much to catch up on. I don't think either of us really knows where to start.

"There's a surprise for you at home," she says at one point.

She doesn't say why she was late getting to the station, and I don't ask, but this is better: a surprise. I think maybe it's a cake or something. I'm kind of hungry because I never made it to the vending machines. Pretty soon, we pass the sign that says WELCOME TO STANTON! It's only that one line, because there's nothing impressive to add.

Everything after that is the same as when I left: the pizza place, little bridge, so-called downtown, and town green, then the little dip in the road and our boxy white house coming up on the left.

We pull into the driveway, and I brace myself for the pothole at just the right moment. Some things you don't forget. The car

comes to a stop and Mom turns it off and drops the keys in her purse. The engine keeps ticking afterward. That's new. I see Mom listening to it, already calculating how much it will end up costing us.

I bang through the side door with my bag, make the right, and head into the front room to drop my stuff. I know the room well, so I don't bother to switch on the light. Sure enough, I slam my shin into something and go down in a heap.

I realize midfall that it must be the coffee table. I realize post-fall that Mom must have moved it while I was away. I grab my shin and swear, but my voice is drowned out by the noise suddenly filling the room. It makes even less sense than the table being out of place. I still can't see anything, so for a second I think maybe I'm imagining it or it's coming from the TV. But the TV is off and the sound keeps coming: It's a dog, barking its head off, barking at me. It makes no sense: We don't have a dog. We never have.

I look around the dark room, trying to figure out where it is. It sounds close, and I don't want to get leg humped or mauled or rabies. I reach up and sort of cover my face, so that I'm looking out through my spread fingers. Just as my eyes are beginning to adjust to the dark, the light flips on and I see my mom standing at the edge of the room.

"Don't worry," she says. "He's new."

It takes me a moment to realize she's talking to the dog.