

THE WORLD WITHIN THE WORLD

[1]

His name is Frank Poole and he likes ice cream. The public park in which he sits with his wife, Caitlin, is otherwise empty. They slouch into the cold, these two, seated side-by-side at the edge of a concrete picnic table, each clutching a paper cup and scooping ice cream slowly into their mouths with tiny plastic spoons, pausing now and again to peer out at the green slope, the occasional lethargic car that passes on the road, the row of silent suburban homes facing the playground. A few hundred yards off, a flock of starlings bursts forth from a stand of stark black trees, forms a series of undulating shapes, and settles once more into those bare spindly branches. From this distance they make no sound whatsoever, their display part of the same pale wash that covers everything.

The two have settled into an identical silence and yet it is not an uneasy one. Frank looks slowly at the empty scene, not with affectation or import or meaning, but merely gazing at what is before him. Tufts of goose down bloom from the split lining of his jacket and the sock hat pulled over his tousled hair is equally battered and unraveling. As for Caitlin, at his side in that long quiet, she sits in similarly disheveled garb. Had you not already known them, you might imagine that they are homeless or at least downtrodden by economics or by circumstance, and yet none of these observations are true.

Caitlin is more frenetic than Poole, fifteen years his junior and lacking whatever deep center of gravity allows him to sit there on the edge of the table, unmoving, without expression or judgment. She pulls at her knit scarf, fidgets with the paper cup. But that is how they work together, these two. It is their balance. Ragged, thin as wisps, and bound to each other.

Silence everywhere on earth and the park the distal point around which it rotates.

When his voice comes, it is from one side of a recorded interview. We cannot hear the interviewer. Instead it is only Frank: halting, sometimes muffled as if by a hand, sometimes nearly inaudible.

Frank Poole. My name is Frank Poole.

Listen, before we go any further: Is this really how it's going to start? I mean, with the ice cream?

I don't know. It's your thing.

No, not weird. Just...I don't know...awkward or something. Anyway, go ahead.

No, no. It's your thing. You just do it. I shouldn't have said anything. You ask your questions.

No, not that. I don't want to talk about that. Ask me something else.

What I'm doing now?

Let's not call it "the development."

No, just call it what it is.

One Day Soon Time Will Have No Place Left to Hide. Yeah, One Day Soon Time Will Have No Place Left to Hide.

No, it's no place. Not nowhere.

It has to be no place. It's important.

Because it's no place. Not nowhere. Nowhere can be anything. No place is specific.

No, I'm not. I'm not upset about it. I'm just trying to tell you why it's no place and not nowhere.

He has been done with his ice cream for some time and he rises now and throws the empty cup into the wire trash bin and then stands, staring down into the container. After a moment he reaches inside. Caitlin says nothing. Both of them silent. A bird chirps cautiously in the sharp bright air.

Sometimes you might find something in here you can use, he says at last, to the camera or to Caitlin or to you.

Or eat, she says.

He chuckles. Yeah, that too. Here's a hamburger.

How much of a hamburger?

About half.

I'll give you a dollar if you eat that.

I don't want to eat that.

Two dollars then.

You're a riot, he says, deadpan. He pulls something out that he likes. A cardboard drink holder. That's interesting, he says.

Not really, Caitlin says. There is a glimmer of humor in her voice.

He continues to look at it, turning it over in his hands. No, he says at last. No, it's good.

Whatever you say, Frank, she says. She's ribbing him, gently.

I think I'd like some more ice cream, he says, still

staring at the cup holder in his hands.

Beyond them: a short rise. The grass freshly cut but also run through with stripes of mud. Were you to place your ear so close, you would hear running water as if a tide, a current, a rushing stream flowing over smooth stones to the sea.

Time to go, Frank.

Is it?

Yep. Stuff to do.

He turns to look at us, at you, his eyes across the grass, the rushing water, the sky, the paper, the words. OK, let's go, he says.

[2]

Buildings and landscapes without beauty. But is this not America? Here a parking lot. Here an unfinished meal resting on the table of some desert casino cafe. A factory set against a gray sky. Blank featureless walls. Empty living rooms with deer heads mounted on vinyl siding. Plastic ceiling lamps meant to look like clusters of grapes. Televisions that display no image but a singular square of black slate. Clouds scudding across empty space the color of concrete.

Then anonymous prefabricated homes. Modern ones. Midsized. One after another. All essentially the same. Perfect lawns. Clean windows. No one home. Nothing inside. Vacant. Again and again.

And finally four white faces. They stare back at you from their sofa. The parents. The children: a boy and a girl. The wallpaper behind them: It is a tangle of blue branches, blue leaves, blue birds.