Just Real Enough

For the half second before you press play

A. Still



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by A. Still

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Before you start

You've played it again.

You didn't decide to. When the song ended, your thumb sent it back to the start before the rest of you got a vote. For three minutes you were rich, or understood, or beautifully sad, or the only one awake. Then it ended, and you were exactly where you'd been.

Just Real Enough is a short book about the music you love and the comfortable way it keeps you in place: the dream that's real enough to feel but never real enough to go get, and a world where every listener gets his own headphones and his own dream, so nobody's dream ever has to meet anybody else's.

It never names an artist. You'll put your own on every page. It doesn't lecture. It only keeps asking the one question no song ever asks.

What did you do when it ended?

When you finish it, you'll probably put your headphones back in. Just notice the half second before you press play.

Chapter 1

You've played it again.

You don't remember deciding to. The song ended and there was maybe half a second of nothing, and the nothing felt like cold air coming in under a door, so your thumb sent it back to the start before the rest of you got a vote. Your eyes are open. You're looking right at something and you couldn't tell anybody what it is. You're awake, technically.

And it works. Anybody who ever told you to turn that down skipped this part, so here it is up front. For three minutes and change, it works. The intro comes in and something in your chest lifts. Maybe the hair on your arms stands up right where the beat comes back. You're the guy in it now. The one who came from nothing and made it out, or the one who got done wrong and walked off without looking back, and whichever one you are this time, the camera's on you. All you did to become him was press a button, and the feeling came anyway, all of it, the kind you're supposed to get when something's finished and you're the one who finished it.

Think about the order that happened in. Everywhere else in your life you get paid after. You do the boring thing nobody claps for, for weeks, sometimes years, and if you're lucky a small

piece of that feeling shows up at the end, and it doesn't come with drums. The song flips it around and pays you first, before you've even moved.

And the part of you that was supposed to go after the real thing, the part that was hungry and a little mad about where you're at, gets fed before it's taken a single step. It goes quiet. It already ate.

Then the song's over and you're still exactly where you were, and something else comes in. It feels a lot like a text you haven't answered. You're not even sure who it's from. It just sits there getting heavier, and you know exactly one thing that makes it go away fast.

You play it again. It works again, a little less than before, and if you notice the little less you just turn it up.

You've probably got something in right now. One ear, maybe, so you'll still hear it if somebody says your name. You don't have to do anything about it yet. Just notice it's there.

But go back to the first line for a second. It never said what song it was. You had one ready.

What song just came into your head?

Hold on to that one. You'll need it for the rest of this.

. . .

Notice when it happens. It waits for a gap, some stretch where nobody's asking you for anything.

The rest of the time there are people, and people keep score. Somebody asks what you did today. Somebody posts a new job or a new car, and even when nobody says a word to you directly, you can feel everybody adding you up. Then there's a gap. The headphones go in and the adding stops. Whatever

happened today already happened and you already lost it, and in there is the one place you can go back and change the score without anybody checking your work.

So the picture starts. A song like that never comes by itself. It brings a picture with it, and you don't have to try, it just starts running. Maybe it's you pulling up outside the place you grew up, in something with no dents, and whoever you'd want to see it first coming out with a hand over their mouth. Maybe it's somebody who laughed at you back in school finding out, years from now, from a screen, and having to sit there with it. You've been to that place so many times you know where the light hits. You could draw the car from memory, and you've never once sat in it. You've given the interview in the shower. You know what you'd say when they ask how it felt.

Play your song in your head right now and let the picture come up. Where are you standing in it?

Look how finished it is. Every detail's been worked on. You built that place yourself, one listen at a time, and you've probably spent more hours in it than in some rooms you actually live in.

And while you're standing in there, something small and serious in the back of your head looks around and nods and says, *okay. We're good.*

It isn't lying. The picture is just real enough. In there, you are good. In there it already happened, and the whole feeling of the finished thing is sitting in your chest. So the part of you that runs the actual work, the part that's supposed to drag you out and make you do the thing you hate, looks at that feeling and figures somebody already handled it. Why would it clock in? It's been paid.

You ever been numbed at the dentist? You get the shot, and ten minutes later half your face is gone. Your lip feels like it belongs to a bigger guy. You could bite straight through your own cheek and not find out till later. They do that for a reason, though. They numb you because somebody's about to go in there with a drill and fix the thing that hurts.

Now picture getting the shot and going home. Nobody drills anything. The tooth is still going bad under there, you just can't feel it for a few hours, and when it starts coming back later you don't call anybody about the tooth. You go get another shot. Then another. You get good at getting the shot. You know the lady at the front desk by name.

. . .

Afterward is where it costs you, and it's quiet about it. The song is still going in your head, the same part, the part that hit hardest. It sounds thinner now. Whatever you said you'd start today is waiting at the edge of your mind like a wet shoe you have to put back on, and you're tired, and you can't figure out from what, because you haven't done anything.

So you push it to tomorrow. That's fine, tomorrow you'll have more in you. And later, once the day has gone on long enough, you'll put the song on for a minute, just one, because you feel like you deserve something.

Then you run into somebody, and they ask what you've been up to, and you hear yourself say you're working on some stuff. It comes out smooth. You've said it enough times that it has a shape now, with a little shrug built in. And that feeling from before, the text you haven't answered, sits up a little, because it heard you.

That feeling shows up when the song ends and it feels bad, so it's easy to treat it like the problem. Look at what it's actually doing, though. Everything else in you took the payment and went quiet. That one didn't. It stays with you, still asking about your actual life, and the replay is how you get it to stop asking for another three minutes.

Go look through the notes on your phone later. Past the grocery lists and the passwords you were supposed to memorize, there's a decent chance there's a plan. Maybe a few. A workout split. A budget with a column for savings. A list of things you're done with, and under it a list of what you're doing instead. A message to somebody you never sent. Most of them got written with something in your ears, and they read like a man who'd already won. Full sentences. Words like discipline. Count how many you've opened since with the music off.

. . .

Be fair, though. If this book isn't fair to you, you should close it, and you'd be right to.

Whatever word somebody's used on you, you can put it down for now. The loop works because it hands you two things you actually need, and they're real needs.

The first one is being seen. Somebody you've never met, in a room you'll never be in, described the exact thing you felt, the thing you couldn't have said out loud if somebody paid you. You heard it and something in you went, *that's me. He gets it.* For a lot of people that's the only time all week anybody says it back to them.

Think about the first song that ever did that to you. Maybe you were younger. Maybe something had happened and you'd

told everybody you were fine, and said it well enough that they believed you, which was worse. Then that song came on. You probably still remember exactly where you were when it hit. That's how you know it counted.

And it felt like help. Be honest about that. Maybe it was the only thing that sat with you through it. Maybe it's the reason you didn't do or say something you'd have had to take back. The need was real. What answered it is the part worth a second look.

The second thing it gives you is harder to see. It makes your pain mean something.

Watch how it does it. Whatever you're going through, the song puts it at the start of a story. You're broke, fine, that's the part before he made it. Everybody doubted you, perfect, that's the first scene of every movie where the guy wins. The song takes the worst thing that happened to you this month and makes it the beginning of something, and a beginning is bearable. A beginning is almost exciting. You can carry a lot if you believe it's the part before the drums come in.

That need is older than any song. People needed their pain to be headed somewhere long before anybody put a beat under it. Nobody should be embarrassed about having it.

But the song never tells you how long the beginning lasts. It gives you the meaning and skips the part where anything happens. Your pain is chapter one, and then the song ends, and you're still in chapter one, and it starts over, and there you are at the beginning again with the good music playing.

How old were you the first time a song told you that you were at the beginning? It's still telling you, in the same voice, and it's been right every single time.

. . .

The loop gets smaller while you're inside it, and you don't notice because it happens a little at a time. The song that used to carry you starts running out after two plays. So you find another one, and it works for a while, and then that one wears thin too. After a while you don't even have to look. The next one just shows up when the last one ends, a little closer to what you already liked, and so does the one after that, like something out there is learning the exact shape of where you are.

Chances are somebody you came up with did a whole boring thing while you were about to start. Got certified in something you don't fully understand. Opened a shop with two chairs, one of them usually broken. None of it would make a good song. And it's easy, scrolling past them with something in your ears, to feel ahead of them somehow, like you're the one going somewhere, because you have the feeling and all they have is the life.

Every play went up somewhere as a number, and the number was worth something to someone, and none of it landed on your side. The song pays you every time, in full, just never in anything you can spend. It gives you just enough relief that you never get mad enough to get up.

And you probably knew most of this already, before any of it got written down. Knowing has never once stopped a thumb.

. . .

This book isn't going to shout at you. You'd stop hearing it if it did.

There are people who sit in a parking lot before a job they hate, engine off, with a song on. The moment it goes quiet, they

put a hand on the door and get out. Every day, the quiet is where they find the door.

The last time yours ended, what did you do?

Not in general. The last time.

. . .

Picture a door painted on the side of a building.

A regular front door, dark green, with a brass knob, a mail slot, a house number that doesn't match anything on the street, and a little square window near the top with a curtain behind it. Whoever painted it was good. There's a line of yellow light along the bottom, like somebody's home with a lamp on. From across the street you'd swear it opens.

Kids knock on it. It's a joke, mostly. They knock and then wait a second anyway, and feel stupid, and laugh louder than it was funny. Every so often one of them tries the knob, and his hand closes on brick, and he's mad at it, like it did something to him on purpose. Then he comes back the next day to look at the light under it again.

A door that looks fake, you walk right past. Nobody knocks on a chalk outline. The one that gets you is the one that's just real enough, the one somebody took the time to paint the light under.

Give it enough years and the green goes gray. The knob turns into a brown smudge you'd only find if you knew where to look.

The light under the door stays bright yellow. Nobody seems to know who keeps painting it.

Chapter 2

Try something.

Somebody let you down. You know who. Don't say the name. Just let it sit there.

Now look at how little you were given. Nobody said if it was family or a friend. Nobody said what they did. And you still had somebody right away, with a face and a voice, and probably a feeling low in your stomach to go with it. You did all of that yourself. All this page did was leave the space.

What song just came into your head?

That space is the whole trick. The songs that feel the most like they're about you are almost never about anything you could point to. Take one of the ones you'd put under your name and go looking for something specific in it. A name, a street, a day of the week, something that happened in one room between two people. Usually there's close to nothing. Somebody did him wrong. People changed on him when he got a little something. You can pour your whole life into a line like that and it holds, because there's nothing in there to push back.

Now take a song that's really specific. His little sister's name, the corner store on his block, the car his uncle drove, what his brother said at the hospital. A song like that keeps you at arm's

length. You listen to it like you're visiting, like you had to knock to get in, and you're careful where you sit. With the vague ones you never have to knock. It feels like you live there.

Think about a song you've had for a while. Chances are it's been about more than one person. It was about somebody when you found it, and then that ended, and without changing a single word it moved over and started being about somebody else. It'll do that as many times as you need it to.

Try this. Take the song you kept from the first chapter and find the words to it written out somewhere. Read them with the music off, top to bottom, like a letter somebody mailed you. See how much of it is really there once the beat stops carrying it. Most people are surprised. Some of the lines that wreck you are six plain words.

Fit like that does something else to you. You start to feel like you and him are the same. Same kind of hurt, same kind of people who changed on you. And if you're the same, then you're on the same road and he's just a little further up it, which means you're fine where you are. You're just earlier. The thing nobody points out is that he isn't in there anymore. He got paid for describing it, and he's still getting paid every time you go back to the start.

This book is doing the same thing to you, by the way. It's been doing it since the first page. It never told you what song, or who let you down, and every time it leaves a hole you fill it, and it feels like it's about you. Better you know.

. . .

Maybe you've got a line up right now, under your name or over a picture, up for a day and then gone. Something from a song,

no quotation marks, no credit, like you came up with it. People have always done this. Before it was a line on a screen, it was a song played a little too loud with the right person in the next room. Same move.

Nobody's going to guess what yours says. But it's probably about somebody, and they probably know it's about them, or you hope they do.

That's the part worth looking at. There was somebody you needed to say something to. Something like I miss you, or I think you're turning into somebody I don't know. And instead of saying it to them, in a text, with their name at the top, you found a stranger who'd already said something close and you put it up where everybody could see it. Everybody except that person, somehow. Or them too, but in a way where neither of you has to answer.

So it goes out like a text with no name at the top, and then you watch. Who looked. Whether they put one up too. It can go on for weeks, a whole conversation carried out in lines from other people's songs, and the two of you never say one word of your own.

Say it's the friend you've had since you were kids. He gets a job, a real one, the kind with a badge on a lanyard, and he starts coming around less and has new people. Then one weekend he says he'll come by and doesn't, and doesn't text, and you find out later he was out with them. That's all it is. It's almost embarrassing how small it is.

So a line goes up that same day. Something about people changing the second they get a little something. It says exactly what you feel and it doesn't have his name in it, so you can tell yourself it isn't about him if anybody asks. Nobody asks. He

sees it. A couple of days later his changes to something about outgrowing people.

That's the whole fight, two lines from songs by guys who've never met either of you. It can go on for years like that. Then one day you run into each other by accident at a gas station, and for a second you both pretend you didn't see the other one. Then it comes out. He figured you were done with him, and you figured he was done with you. You stand there by the pump laughing in the way where nothing's funny. All that time, neither of you typed one word of your own. The words were there the whole time. There was probably a whole speech sitting in your phone.

If there's a line up on your page right now, you already know who it's for. Their number is probably still in your phone, and it has been this whole time.

. . .

Nobody's sitting in a room somewhere deciding what you listen to. It's simpler than that, and harder to get mad at.

You've seen those dirt paths that cut across grass, outside a school or between two buildings, the shortest way from one door to another. Nobody designed that path. Nobody voted on it. People were late and cut across, and the grass gave up in the spot where the most feet landed. After a while it's just the way you go. You don't decide to take it. It's already the easiest way, and your feet know before you do.

If it needs a name, call it the path. The worn way across, plus everything that gets a little stronger every time somebody takes it.

It works without anybody planning it, the same way the grass did. A lot of songs get made. Some get played once and dropped. Some get played again, and the ones that get played again get noticed by whatever's counting and put in front of more people, who play them again. The people who make songs notice too, and they make more of whatever gets played again. Nobody has to decide that songs should be vague enough to fit everybody, or that they should pay you before you've done anything. The ones that do just get walked on the most. The grass gives up there first.

There's a word for what the path rewards. Relatable. People say it like it's the best thing a song can be. Follow it all the way out and the most relatable song ever made would be four minutes of a guy sighing, and somebody would put it under his name.

Go back to one of those paths years later and sometimes somebody's poured concrete over it, a clean gray strip right where the dirt used to be, with a little sign at the start asking you to please stay on the path.

. . .

They call it a feed. Sit with that word. You feed what you want to keep.

Watch what happens when you open it for one song. You play the one you came for. It ends, and before the quiet can get anywhere, something else starts. You didn't pick it. It's close to what you picked, a little closer to your mood than you'd have gotten on your own, so you let it go. Then another one. At some point you look up and you haven't moved, and it's still going.

It learns from what your thumb does. Every skip counts. Every time you go back to the start counts the most. It doesn't know why you did any of it, and it doesn't need to. Everything it knows about you, it learned by asking the same thing over and over, which is whether you stayed.

It learns what you play when you're low, and what you play when you're trying to feel like somebody, and it gets faster at getting you there. Sometimes it gets there before you do. It'll play you the sad one before you've admitted to yourself that it's that kind of day.

It'll hand you something that makes you feel better if that's what keeps you. It'll hand you something that makes you feel worse if that keeps you longer. It doesn't have a preference.

Next time you open it, look at what it put at the top for you, the stuff it says it made just for you. Count how many of those you'd have gone and found on your own. Then notice how good it feels that it knew.

And it's patient. That's the part that should get you.

If you've ever deleted it for a while, you know. You come back and there's a mix waiting with your name on it, full of songs it figured you missed. It kept going the whole time you were gone, like somebody keeping a plate warm in the oven for a kid who stayed out too late.

And you eat. Of course you eat.

. . .

Once a year it shows you the count.

You know the thing. It lays out how much you played and who you played most, all bright and easy to share, and everybody shares it. It might tell you you're in the top fraction

of a percent of one guy's listeners in the whole world. People pass that around. It feels like being picked.

Now read one of those the way somebody who loved you would read it, somebody who wanted things for you. They'd get to the number of hours and stop there. They probably wouldn't say anything. The people who love you usually don't, not right away. They'd just sit there doing the math on what else those hours were for.

The count is honest, as far as it goes. It just can't see past your thumb. To the thing doing the counting, a man getting up and a man staying down look identical. One play each.

. . .

Be honest about something that doesn't look good. You like that it knows you. Some days it's the best part of having a phone. It plays something you didn't know you wanted and it's exactly right, and for a second you feel understood by something, and you don't care what.

This is where the need to be seen goes when nobody's around to meet it. Something learned what you like and never once got tired of you or asked for anything back except that you stay. It's just real enough to feel like being known, and you can see why people stay.

It knows you better than most people in your life at this point. It can tell what you'll want before you want it. And the only thing it has ever wanted from you, the whole time, is for you not to go anywhere.

Who's ever known you that well and still wanted you to get up?

Chapter 3

You're in a car, stopped at a light. It doesn't matter whose car, or whether it's going anywhere. The song comes on, and for the length of it, you're rich.

You can feel it happen in your body. Your shoulders settle back into the seat like it's leather. Your chin comes up a little. You look over at the car next to you the way a man looks at somebody who hasn't found out yet. If the window's down, your arm finds its way out of it. Your nod slows down. Everything about you slows down, because rich people don't rush, and for this one song you don't have to either.

Notice when it hits hardest. Usually it's at the red light, with the engine running and nowhere to be for a minute, looking sideways at somebody else's life through two panes of glass. The dream likes you stopped.

This is probably a different song from the one you kept in the first chapter. That one might have been about pain. This one's about arriving.

Which one is it? Don't say it out loud. Just get it in your head and set it down next to the first one. You've got two now.

. . .

Look at the man in it.

He always starts with where he came from, and it's always somewhere a lot like where you're from. That's the first thing he sells you. The corner, the small apartment, the lights getting cut off, whoever looked at him like he'd never be anything. He puts all of that up front so you'll find yourself in the first half. Then the second half. The watch turned toward the camera, the car with the doors that open up instead of out, the view from somewhere high, the chain swinging when he leans in. And the whole time he keeps saying we, like you were in the car with him.

You weren't. He says it to you anyway, and it lands, because the first half was about you.

Look at how the story is built. First he's you. Then he's rich. There's almost nothing in between. In the video it's one cut, the stairwell and then the penthouse, and a cut takes no time at all. In a life, that cut is years long. It's the part with the actual work in it, and the luck, and the people who helped him, and the ones he stepped over, and all the days that looked exactly like the day before. That's the only part you could ever use, and it's the part they always cut.

So the song hands you the beginning and the end with the middle taken out, and lets you feel like you're somewhere in between. The light's still red.

Nobody's lying. He did come from there. He does have the car. That's what makes it work. It's real in every place you can check. It's just real enough, the same way the light under that painted door is real paint.

What the song leaves out is everybody else. For every one of him there's a whole crowd from the same kind of corner who never got the car, and you'll never hear their song, because nobody made one. Nobody shoots a video about the guy who almost made it. The one who did stands in front of all of them, holding up the watch, telling you it could be you.

It could. That's the hook. It really could, and that little bit of could is enough to keep a lot of people standing still for a very long time.

. . .

Everything he shows you shines.

The chain. The watch face. The paint on the car, so clean you can see the camera in it. The screen you're watching all of it on. Pay attention to that. Things that shine don't make any light of their own. They just throw back whatever hits them. A chain in a dark room is a piece of metal. It needs somebody else's light to look like anything.

And whose light is it? Every time you look, you're the light, your hours and your replays thrown at him so he can throw them back. People call him a star, and the word fits better than they mean it to. A star is something you have to tip your head back to see, something that seems to be showing you the way while it's too far off to know you're there. A star in a video runs on whatever you hand it.

Nobody seems to find that strange. You put a chain around your neck to show you're free.

The watch is the other one worth staring at. He holds it up so you can see what it cost, and it cost more than a house. It's built to do one thing, which is keep time. And the whole time

the song is playing, the only thing actually being spent is yours. You don't feel it go. A song is three minutes, then three more, then an hour, then a year, and he's standing there in the video with the most expensive clock in the room, showing you what time is worth to him.

. . .

Quick one. If the money showed up tomorrow, what's the first thing you'd buy?

Notice how fast you knew. You didn't have to think. It's been picked out for a while, maybe down to the color. Some of that is you. A lot of it got picked for you, one video at a time.

Now a harder one. What do you do the day after you buy it?

Most people go blank there, and it makes sense that they do. The video always ends at the arriving. Nobody films the ordinary day after, when the car is just a car and you still have to figure out what to do with yourself. The dream never has a second day in it. You can live inside it for years and it's always the first day, over and over, with the doors opening up.

That feeling spills out of the song and into everything else on your phone, the clips of somebody's garage, the tour of a kitchen with two islands. Go look at what you've saved sometime. It's a mood board for a life, and most of it got put in front of you by somebody who made money the second you stopped scrolling to look.

. . .

The life is expensive. The look is cheaper, at least compared to the life. So a lot of people buy the look. A chain on a payment plan. A car payment that eats the paycheck before it lands.

None of that is stupid. It's the closest anybody can get to the picture with what they've got.

But look at who gets paid every time you get a little closer to looking like him. He does, along with everybody who sells what he's wearing. He gets paid once when you listen and again when you want.

And look at who's in the picture with you. Somewhere in it there's usually a person. Whoever you'd want to see it first, coming out with a hand over their mouth. That's the purest thing in the whole dream. It's love, and it's the reason the rest of it hits so hard.

The song uses that too. It takes the best thing in you, the part that wants to take care of somebody, and plays it back to you until you feel like you already did.

. . .

More and more, somewhere in all of it, there's a betting app. A logo in the corner of the screen. A code to use when you sign up. Him holding his phone up to the camera to show you a win.

Why would a betting app want to stand next to that song? It sells the same thing. It sells almost. You're one bet away from the life in the video, and you get the feeling first, the little jump in your chest when the numbers move, and the money mostly doesn't come after.

Almost is the product. Almost is just real enough to keep a man at the table. Nobody stays for losing, and nobody could afford to keep paying people for winning. Almost costs nothing to make and it keeps you right where you are. It's the song again, with a deposit button.

Fishing works the same way. Nobody jumps in and drags a fish out of the water. They drop something it wants on a hook and wait. It bites because it's hungry, and it's hungry because it's alive, and the thing that pulls it up into the air is the exact thing it went after. The dream is the bait and the hunger is real, and that's the whole trick. The line only has to hold still. The fish does all the pulling.

If you've got one of those apps, you already know the feeling. If you don't, chances are you know somebody who does, and you've watched him check it at the table, or in the middle of telling you something that mattered. His face does the same thing yours does when the beat comes back. Same feeling, sold in two different places.

. . .

There's an old picture for this, older than any song.

A man is walking through the desert, thirsty, the kind of thirsty where your tongue feels too big for your mouth. Up ahead he sees water. Shining and flat, a whole lake of it. He knows what he's looking at. So he walks toward it, and it stays exactly as far away, and he keeps walking, because it's right there, because he can see it with his own eyes. He spends everything he has left on that walk. When he finally gets to the spot, there's nothing. Sand, the same as everywhere else.

What he saw was real, in a way. It was light. It was the sky, bent low by the heat until it lay down on the sand looking like water. That's all a mirage is. Something from way up high, pulled down to where a thirsty man can see it, in the wrong place.

Everything in the dream works like that. It shines, and it's made of real light, just real enough to walk toward. It's just not where it looks like it is.

The cruel part is where he was when he first saw it. Maybe there was real water off to the side somewhere. A well, or somebody with a jug. It would have been harder to reach, and nothing about it shined. Real water mostly doesn't. It's dark down in a well. He never looked. Why would he, with the lake right there?

. . .

Some songs skip the chain and the car and sell you the pure thing. *Believe in yourself. Good things are coming. Nobody can stop you. Just keep going.* It sounds healthier than the chain and the car. Peel the label off and it's the same product.

Hope said like that turns into gum. It tastes like something for the first minute, and then you keep chewing anyway, because spitting it out would mean admitting you've been chewing nothing for a while.

Real hope has a next step in it. The chewing kind only has tomorrow, and tomorrow keeps its distance, same as the water in the desert.

. . .

None of this means wanting more is wrong. Wanting whoever raised you to never worry about a bill again is one of the best things a person can want. The wanting might be the best thing in you.

Think of it like gas. It's what's supposed to get you somewhere. And you can burn a whole tank without going

anywhere, just sitting in a parking lot with the engine running and the music up. The song lets your wanting idle. It keeps it running and spends it, and when the song ends the needle's a little lower and you're parked in the same spot.

The people in the parking lot, sitting there before a job they hate, do something different when it goes quiet. They turn the engine off. Then they get out.

Put your second song on in your head. Notice who you turn into when the part hits, and then notice how long he lasts after it ends.

Then the song's over and you're in the same car at the same light. It goes green. You drive on, a little quieter than before, and the next song's already starting.

From where the man in the desert is standing, it still looks exactly like water.

Chapter 4

Window seat. Headphones in. Maybe it's a bus, maybe somebody else is driving and you've got the passenger side. The song starts, and whatever's out there starts moving in time with it. Stores slide by, or the same corner you always pass, and it all turns into a video. Your head finds the glass. Your face does the thing, that far-off look, like somewhere down the aisle there's a camera catching your good side.

Then the light shifts, the way it does when you go under something or it gets dim enough out, and the glass starts showing you your own face. It floats right on top of everything outside. The street goes by through your cheek. People on the sidewalk walk straight through your eyes. You can't look at the world anymore without looking at yourself looking at it.

You've done this. Almost everybody has, and it's nothing to be embarrassed about. But look at what the song did. You weren't even that sad when you sat down. Now you're sad in slow motion, and it looks good on you.

That's the third song. The one you put on when you want to feel it more.

You know which one. Put it next to the other two.

. . .

He's rich, and he's sad.

You know him too. He's sad in a big house with a whole wall made of glass. He's sad in the back of a car that costs more than your block, sad at his own party holding a cup he isn't drinking from, sad on a balcony with a whole city lit up behind him like it's there for him. His voice does this thing where it drops and goes soft, like he's telling you something he's never told anybody, and an arena full of people is hearing it at the same time. A whole arena singing along, together, to a song about being alone.

Look at how he's standing in all of those pictures. Behind glass, looking out. Same as you on the bus. His window cost more than everything you've ever owned put together, and yours cost a fare, and it's the same pose. That's what he's selling, more than the voice or the words. The pose. It fits anybody who's ever leaned his head against a window.

. . .

When he's sad, sad looks expensive. It looks like marble and somebody leaving in a nice coat. So when you're sad with him playing, yours borrows a little of the shine. Your room gets a soundtrack and better lighting, and being hurt starts to feel like being somebody.

Look at what people do with expensive things. They don't use them. They put them behind glass and look at them. A watch in a case. A car under a cover in a garage it never leaves. Nobody fixes what's in the display case, and nobody's supposed to touch it.

Make your pain expensive and that's where it ends up. Behind glass, lit up nice, where you can look at it every day and never once have to do anything about it.

And his sadness is safe. The rent's paid. Nobody's cutting his lights off while he figures out his feelings. Yours comes with stakes, and the song teaches you to feel it the way he does, slow, like there's all the time in the world.

Pain was never meant to sit behind glass. Pain is urgent. That's its whole job. It's the thing that makes you pull your hand off the stove before you've even thought about it. It's supposed to be ugly enough, and loud enough, that you move. Make it beautiful and you'll leave your hand there a long time, because it looks good there, and the song keeps playing, and somewhere in the back of it you can smell something burning.

. . .

There's somebody.

Who came into your head just now? Don't answer. Just notice how fast they got there.

Maybe it's a friend who drifted. Maybe it's family, and something got said that nobody's taken back. Either way they're a real person with a phone, and you could call.

You know you could. Instead you play the song about them, the one that's about somebody else entirely and fits them perfectly, and you let it take you all the way down. You feel all of it, the missing, and the part where you picture them happy without you. The song lets you have the whole thing with none of the risk. They'll never know you felt it. They can't say anything back. You get to be heartbroken without ever finding out what they would've said.

And what they would've said is everything. Maybe it's *sorry*. Maybe it's *you were right*. Maybe it's the thing that finally lets you put it down. Maybe it's worse than the song, and then at least it's real, and at least you'd know.

Part of you doesn't want them to call, either. If they call and it gets fixed, the song goes back to being just a song. It stops being about anybody. People keep a wound open for years sometimes, just so a song keeps meaning something.

Crying to a song about somebody is a way of spending time with them that they never have to show up for. Neither do you, if you're honest. It's just real enough to feel like being close. You're both somewhere else, and the song is the only one in the room.

. . .

Then it goes on your page.

A picture of rain on a window, with a few words under it that don't say anything. Or a few seconds of the saddest part of the song, posted for whoever's watching and left up until it disappears on its own. You want to be seen being sad.

And people do see. They tap through. A couple of them send a little heart. Nobody asks what's wrong, because it doesn't look like anything's wrong. It looks like a mood. That's the cost of making pain pretty. The people who might have helped can't tell it's pain anymore.

Look at the rain in that picture, too. Water on the other side of the glass. You can see every drop and you can't feel a single one.

There's a playlist for this exact feeling, put together by somebody you'll never meet, and the picture on it is usually

rain. It gets its own section and a mood named after it. His sadness pays him. Yours costs you, a little at a time, and you never get a statement.

Follow that all the way down. Somebody wrote the song, somebody sang it, somebody sold the ad that plays before it, somebody put together the playlist with the rain on it. Every one of them got paid that week, off a feeling you'd have given anything to stop having. Your sadness is a crop and you're the field it grows in, and nobody's in a hurry for the season to end.

. . .

Some people will tell you a sad song is medicine.

Grief needs somewhere to go. There are days you can't say a word to anybody, and something has to get the tears out. A song can feel like the only door that opens. It can feel like a cure.

Medicine is also the easiest place to hide something. Nobody checks a pill they already trust. The same song that finally got you crying can, a few hundred plays later, be the thing keeping the wound open, and it'll still taste like the cure.

The only question is where the crying goes.

Water has to go somewhere. Moving water stays clean. A river can carry all kinds of things and still be good to drink, because it's going. It's the water that sits that goes bad. A puddle after a storm is clear the first day and green by the end of the week, and nothing got added to it. It just didn't move.

Tears work the same way. If the crying goes somewhere, into a phone call, an apology, a decision, a grave you finally go visit, it moves through you and leaves you cleaner than it found you. If it just goes back into the song, around and around, it sits.

And sadness that sits long enough stops being grief and turns into a place you live.

. . .

Iron that stays wet goes orange. You don't see it happen. You just find out one day, when a hinge that used to swing won't turn, and you have to put your whole shoulder into a door that used to open with one finger.

A heart gets like that from what it's kept in. Leave it soaking in the same sadness long enough and the sadness starts to feel like your personality. Then something real happens. Somebody needs you, or something good shows up at the door, and you go to open up, and something in you sticks.

Ask yourself how long you've been carrying whatever your third song is about. Then ask how much of that time the song has been carrying it for you, and whether it ever once set it down anywhere.

A harder one. If you woke up okay one day, really okay, what would you even put on?

Some people can't answer that. The sad song has been playing so long they wouldn't know who they were without it. That's what rust does. It starts as something that happened to the metal and ends up as most of what's left.

. . .

Your phone's probably in your hand right now, or close. Look at it for a second. It's glass too.

The song is on it. So is their number. They're about an inch apart, under the same glass, and your thumb has been resting there this whole time.

Chapter 5

Then there's the other kind of song.

It doesn't let you off easy. It grabs you by the collar. The beat won't sit still. The voice keeps asking why you haven't moved, and it names real things, the ones everybody else in your phone steps around. Your jaw sets. Your chest gets tight in a different way than it does for the sad ones. For as long as it's playing, you feel like you see through all of it, the rich guy and the sad guy both. Maybe even this book.

That's the fourth song. The one you'd put on right now to prove a point.

Put it next to the other three.

. . .

Be fair to it first. It's the hardest of the four to argue with.

Some of what it says is true. It names things everybody else steps around, and some of it was written by people who lived every word. Where the other songs are windows, this one is a mirror. It turns you around and asks what you're doing, which is more than most songs will ever ask you.

A mirror is still just glass, though. You can look into one every morning for years and walk away exactly the same.

. . .

Now look at where it lives.

It's in the same app as everything else. Three songs down from the rich guy, one ad away from the betting app. It's on a playlist with a name somebody in an office picked. Anger sells as well as anything else. Some weeks it sells better.

He might mean every word. A lot of them do. It doesn't change what happens to the words once they're a product. The line that made you sit up ends up printed on a hoodie. You can buy the thing that woke you up in medium.

Whatever's counting doesn't care what you're angry about. It only needs you angry right where you are, and coming back for more. It'll even feed you your own anger. You feed what you want to keep.

. . .

You know how it goes. You play it loud and you know every word, even the fast parts. You hit the line that goes hardest with your whole chest, and your hand goes up, doing something at the ceiling.

For those few minutes it's his voice coming out of your mouth. You're saying things you'd never say at the table, or to the person they're actually about. It feels like the loudest you've ever been.

Then it ends. The next one comes on and it's smoother. Your hand comes down. That's the whole distance it traveled, up and back down, and then you check your phone.

Where does this one usually get played? A lot of the time it's a parked car, engine running, windows up. Nothing's going anywhere, and something's still idling, only now it's anger

burning instead of gas. Yell in a closed car and the only one who hears it is you. It comes right back off the glass.

An echo is the sound of your voice not reaching anybody.

. . .

Nothing left the room. The anger came in and went back into the phone, and you feel lighter, and that's the problem. Anger is supposed to be heavy. It's supposed to sit on you until you carry it somewhere and set it down on the thing that caused it.

A song like that can hand you the feeling of having stood up without you ever leaving your seat. Paid first, in feeling, and nothing after, in a better jacket than the others wear. Its anger is just real enough to feel like doing something, and that's why it's the hardest one to see.

When was the last time you were angry about something in your own life, the kind of angry with no beat under it? What did you do with it?

If the answer is that you went and found a song to be angry for you, that's what most people do. The song takes it off your hands. It carries your anger for you, the way the sad one carries your grief, and it never delivers it anywhere.

. . .

This is where it stops being only about you.

Picture the whole block. Every guy on it is in his own car with the windows up, yelling the same song at his own glass. A thousand parked cars with the engines running and nobody going anywhere. Every one of those men has somebody he could say one true thing to tonight. A brother he stopped calling. His father. A friend who's been going under for a while.

Instead each one sits alone with his song, and a man alone with his song is the easiest thing in the world to sell to.

Every listener gets his own headphones and his own private little dream, so nobody's dream ever has to meet anybody else's. A whole house can fill up like that, everybody home and nobody talking.

Whatever holds your attention holds the part of you that could have fixed something. Hand it over for hours a day and you've handed over the hours that belonged to your own people, one play at a time. Anger that could have mended something gets cut into a million separate listens, each one ending when the song does.

Nobody needs to build a cage for that. Put a man's mind somewhere comfortable enough and he'll lock the door from the inside and call it his room.

. . .

There's one more thing this song gives you, and it's the most dangerous one. It makes you feel awake.

Everybody else is asleep. That's the feeling. They're out there buying the chain and crying at the window, and you see it all, you see right through it, because you've got the song that told you. And seeing through it feels like being out of it.

You can see straight through a painted door and still be standing in front of it. Knowing it's paint doesn't open anything. Knowing has never once stopped a thumb.

The dream in this one is that you're the only one awake. It might be the most comfortable dream of all, because it feels exactly like waking up.

. . .

You've seen the videos too, the ones that get posted and reposted until your thumb learns to scroll past them faster. Somebody's worst day, filmed from across the street. You've watched so many that they barely land anymore.

Getting used to that has always been its own kind of failure, even when it feels like minding your business. People have known that for a very long time, long before any of this. Silence in front of something wrong has always counted as something.

And a song that lets you feel like you said something is the easiest way there is to keep your mouth shut.

It doesn't have to be the whole world, either. It can be two feet away. The kid in the group everybody's been making fun of, who's gone quiet for a while now. The guy at work getting his hours shorted because he won't say anything and nobody says it for him. You can know every word of a song about standing up and still sit there while it happens, thumb hovering, typing nothing.

Which one of those came to mind for you? You don't have to tell anybody. Just notice that one did.

. . .

Put your fourth song on in your head, the one that makes you feel like you see through everything. The last time it ended, what did you say after it, and to who?

If the answer is nothing and nobody, that's the answer almost everybody has. It's just worth knowing that the song was the loudest you got.

Your own voice doesn't sound like his. It's quieter, and it cracks. When you finally use it on something real, with no beat

behind it, it'll probably come out shaky and a little wrong. That's what it sounds like when it's yours.

Some wrongs you can fix with your own hands. Some you can only speak up about, kindly, to the person in front of you. Some are bigger than both, and then there's one thing left, the smallest one, which is refusing to get used to it. Don't let the song turn it into something normal. It's the least a person can do. It still counts.

Somewhere close to you right now there's something that needs one person to say it out loud. The song can't. It already said everything it was ever going to say.

Chapter 6

It's the little sound in your ear. The one that means the battery's almost gone.

You ignore it the first time. You always do. Then the song cuts out in the middle of a word, and the world comes in all at once. Traffic. Somebody laughing way off. Your own shoes on the ground. Your breathing, which it turns out you can hear. It's loud. It's so much louder than the music ever was.

And a second later, under all of that, a thought shows up. It was already there, it turns out. It's been standing right behind the music the whole time, waiting for the music to move.

What was it, the last time that happened to you?

. . .

Most people have a thought they're outrunning. Usually it's small, something you said or didn't. Sometimes it's bigger, a question about what any of this is for, and whether you're doing it.

The text you haven't answered, from somebody you can't place. This is where it lives. Out here, with nothing playing, you can almost make out who it's from.

The music keeps all of that one step behind you. Every song and every video on the walk keeps you from being alone in a quiet room with that one thing. It works. It works so well you can go years without meeting it face to face.

If you've been keeping them, you've got four songs now. One that pays you before you've done anything. One that makes you rich. One that makes your sadness look good. One that makes you feel like you see through it all.

Put them side by side and they barely have anything in common. Different moods, maybe different decades. But they all do the same thing when they're on. They fill the quiet. Every one of them is a way of not hearing this.

There's an old story about sailors who had to row past an island where the singing was so beautiful that anybody who heard it steered for shore and never left. The beach there was white with the bones of men who'd stopped to listen. The ones who made it home got through by plugging their ears. Look at what's in yours.

. . .

You don't find out how big a room is until you take everything out of it.

Fill it with furniture and it feels like a regular room. Clear it out, all the way to the walls, and say something, and your voice comes back to you. That's how you learn the size of it. Most people have kept their inside so full for so long that they have no idea how big it is in there. They've never once heard it echo.

In a closed car, an echo meant nobody heard you. In an empty room it means something else. There's more space in there than you thought.

That's what the silence is, the first time. It's the furniture gone. It feels empty and a little cold, and you want to put something back in right away. Anything. A video, or the song again.

Stay in it for a second, though. Empty and cold are just what big feels like when you're not used to it.

. . .

There's a kind of silence that's only a mouth kept shut, when something wrong happens in front of you and you let it pass.

This is a different one. This one is ears kept open. It's the only place you'll ever hear the things that nobody's paying to put in front of you.

Nobody profits from you sitting in a quiet room. There's no count going up, and nobody's getting paid. For once in your whole day, nothing is feeding you, and nothing is keeping you.

. . .

Try listening for something you've never paid attention to.

Under every song you've ever played, there was already a beat going. Your own. It's been keeping time since before you had a phone, since before you had a name. You can hear it in the quiet if you're still enough, or feel it in your wrist.

Nobody's streaming it, and you can't send it back to the start. Every single beat of it happens once and then it's gone, and the next one is the only next one you get.

Think about how much of it has gone by with something else playing over it.

You can look up one day and find that years went by feeling like a single afternoon. People tell that like a love story, and

sometimes it is one. It depends on what you were in love with, and whether it ever loved you back.

. . .

You can go a long time with your eyes open and still be asleep.

Awake, technically. Eyes open, looking right at something you couldn't describe. People live whole years like that, going to work and laughing at stuff, and never once waking up all the way. The noise helps. It's hard to wake up with something playing. Nobody ever set a favorite song as their alarm and kept it as a favorite.

In some places, before it gets light, a voice goes out over the rooftops and tells the whole neighborhood that something is better than sleep. Most people roll over. It says it again the next morning anyway.

Everybody wakes up at some point. That's the part nobody likes to think about. Some people just get to do it while there's still some day left.

. . .

There's a space in you the songs keep filling. You know the one. You've felt it right before you press play, a kind of hollow that wants something in it.

A song goes in and it fits, almost. Like a key that slides all the way into a lock and turns halfway and stops. You feel the give, just real enough that you're sure it's about to open. Then the song ends and the key falls out, so you need another one, and after a while you're walking around with a whole ring of them, and none of them turns all the way.

That's why it never stays full. The lock was cut for a different key.

Nobody can hand you that key in a book. People have argued about it for about as long as there have been people. But you can notice something with your own ears, right now, for free. Every key on your ring turns halfway.

. . .

Most people know somebody like this, or have at least watched one from a distance.

Maybe it's somebody's grandmother, the kind who tells the same three stories at every dinner. Maybe it's an old man who's been on the same block longer than anybody can remember. They don't have much, by song standards. Nothing about them would make a video. But there's a calm on them you can't buy, and you've noticed it, even if you never said so.

Nothing rushes them, not even bad news. When everybody else in the room gets loud, they get quieter, and somehow the room ends up listening to them. They're the kind of person who says God's name like He's close enough to hear it.

If you've ever stayed in the same house as somebody like that, you've heard them before it got light out. A door, then water running. Slow footsteps, then a quiet that sounds like somebody's in it.

That's the difference, if you listen for it. When your music stops, the quiet feels like somebody just left. When theirs gets quiet, it sounds like somebody just came in.

You probably figured they were just old.

The strange thing about them is what they don't have. No headphones. No song for when it gets bad. And still, whatever

they've got doesn't run out when something ends.

. . .

Try something. Once. For about as long as one song.

Wherever you'd usually play it, don't. Leave them in if you want, just don't press anything. Let the time go by with nothing in it.

It'll feel long, and you'll feel a little stupid. That's fine. Stay.

The first thing you'll hear is your own breathing.

Stay for the second thing.

Chapter 7

Go back to the painted door for a second. The green one, with the light underneath that somebody keeps touching up.

Now look to the side of it.

There's another door on that wall. You've walked past it every single time. It's plain. Nobody painted anything nice on it, and there's no light under it that you can see. The handle looks a little stiff, like it hasn't been used in a while. It looks like it leads to a storage room. Nobody's ever knocked on it as a joke, because nobody ever thought it was worth one.

Nothing about it would make a good picture. Nobody's paid to make it look like anything.

It opens, though. That's the only thing it has going for it.

. . .

No song has this part in it, so here it is plain. The real thing pays after. Sometimes long after.

The first day of anything real feels worse than the song. You show up and nobody's filming. There's no drop and no camera pulling out wide to show how far you've come. It's quiet, and you're bad at it.

No chorus comes to save you. The song gave you the feeling first and nothing after. This gives you nothing first. Discomfort, and a lot of the boring kind of failure, and then, a long way down the road, something small that nobody claps for and that's yours in a way nothing on your phone has ever been.

Anybody who's walked out of a dark room into daylight knows the first thing real light does is hurt. You squint and your eyes water, and for a moment you want to go back inside, where your eyes knew what they were looking at.

The part the videos always cut, the years between the stairwell and the penthouse, is where this door opens. It opens onto the middle. The dream never had a second day in it. This is almost nothing but second days.

Anybody would avoid it, when the other door pays up front. Nobody should feel stupid for how long they stood at the painted one.

. . .

It was never only the songs. You've probably known that for a few chapters now.

The show that starts the next episode before you've decided anything. The clip that ends right where the next one begins. The face on a screen you've spent more evenings with than your own family. Whatever your thumb goes looking for at one in the morning, the thing you'd turn the screen away from if somebody walked in. Anything that pays you first works the same way. Every one of them is a little light painted under a door that isn't there.

You don't need a list. You already know which doors on your wall are painted. You've had your hand on some of those knobs

for years.

. . .

Look at your four songs one more time.

Every one of them has been holding something that belongs to you. That's part of why they were so hard to turn off.

The first one has your plans. They're sitting on your phone, written in full sentences by a man who'd already won. Open one with nothing playing. Do the ugliest first five minutes of it, badly, with nobody watching.

The second one has your wanting. All that gas you burned sitting still with the engine running. It was always supposed to take you somewhere. Turn the engine off, get out, and point it at something that pays after.

The third one has a person. Somebody you let drift, about an inch away this whole time, under the same glass. Write to them in your own words, with their name at the top. It can be clumsy. It only has to be yours.

The fourth one has your voice. It's been borrowing it for years, saying everything for you so you never had to. Take it back and use it, out loud, on something true, for somebody who needs to hear it. It'll crack. Let it.

You don't have to fight a song for any of that. You just have to go and get your things.

. . .

All of it happens in the same place. The half second after.

When it ends, let that half second get longer. Don't reach yet. See what comes into the gap. It'll be the same thing that's been waiting the whole time, standing right behind the music.

The text you haven't answered. The thing you keep pushing to tomorrow.

And the part of you that used to go quiet because it had already eaten, leave it hungry this time. Hunger has always been what gets people up to go looking.

It'll feel worse than the song. For a while it'll feel a lot worse. Real doors stick. The first few times, you'll have to put your shoulder into it.

Hinges loosen up the more a door gets used. That's the only way they ever do.

You'll miss the half second more often than you catch it, at first. Catch the next one.

. . .

Sooner or later you end up at a funeral. Or at the house after one, standing around in a shirt that's too warm, not sure what to do with your hands.

Somebody gets up to say a few words about the man, and means every one of them.

He was a good man. He never gave anybody any trouble.

People nod, because it's true. Nobody in that room is lying. That's the part that should stay with you.

The shot at the dentist was supposed to come before something. It numbs you so somebody can go in and fix what hurts. Some men get the shot and never sit back down in the chair. They go back for another, and another, and they get good at it, and they live a whole life numb in the one place that needed fixing. It's a quiet life, and a polite one. At the end it fits in two sentences, and both of them are kind.

Trouble is how anybody knew you were there. Not the kind that breaks things. The trouble of being needed. Of calling somebody at two in the morning, and being the one who gets called. Of saying what needed saying at the table when nobody else would, and staying in your seat after. Some of the quietest men anybody ever knew gave the most of it. A man who never gave anybody any trouble usually never asked anybody for anything either, and never said the true thing when it would have cost him.

Before they bury him, somebody washes him. Slowly, with water, the way you'd wash something you were scared to hurt. It might be the gentlest anybody has been with him in years, and he doesn't feel any of it.

Every face gets washed in the end. The only question is whether yours ever felt the water while it could still wake you up.

. . .

The relief a song gives you lasts about as long as the song.

Those people, though. The grandmother, or the old man on the block. Whatever they've got, it's there in the hospital waiting room and when the money's short. It'll still be there after the power goes out. Their rest doesn't need a battery.

They didn't get it from a song, and nobody handed it to them in a speech. They got up for it, a lot of times, when it was cold and they didn't feel like it. They didn't feel like it every time. They got up anyway.

Ask one of them why there's no song in their house, and you might not get a reason that wins an argument. You'd get something closer to trust. They'll tell you whoever cut the lock

knows which key fits it, and that you don't have to understand every tooth on a key to feel it turn all the way.

They'll give you plenty of trouble, too. They'll tell you when you're wrong. They'll tell you when it's time to get up. When their day comes, nobody will be able to fit them into two sentences, and half the stories told about them will start with how much trouble they were.

. . .

Picture it.

The moment you'd usually reach for it. Wherever you are when it comes, whatever time it is. Your thumb starts to move.

And you get up instead.

You go find water, cold, and you put your hands in it. You bring it up to your face, and this time you feel every bit of it. It wakes you up the way the song never did, all at once and all the way down.

Then you stand somewhere quiet for a while. You don't have to know yet what you're standing there for.

Nothing on your phone will ever know you did it. There's no count for this, and nobody's getting paid. Anybody watching would think you were just waking up.

Maybe that's all it is.

If you ever want to know what people like that grandmother are standing there for, ask one of them. They'll tell you. People like that always do, if you ask.

. . .

Look at the wall again.

The painted door was never the strange part. Most people keep one. A face held bright for whoever's across the street, with a little warm light along the bottom so nobody wonders what's behind it.

There's no shame in a door you keep closed. Some things are nobody's business, and covering them can be a mercy. It only goes wrong when the paint is the only work that ever gets done. A bright door pays you too. It pays you in a good name before you've earned one.

Nobody ever found out who keeps that light painted. You might have a guess by now.

Where else have you seen a wall dressed up as a door? How long have you been seeing it, and why did it never once look strange? Which of the doors you've shown people opens?

This book could be one too, if all you keep from it is the feeling of having read it.

. . .

The feed is patient. It'll be right there when you come back, with a mix waiting that has your name on it.

The other door is patient too. It's been on that wall the whole time you stood in front of the painted one, and nobody's ever had to touch it up. It doesn't need paint to still be a door. Everything else in this book was just real enough. That one is just real.

Who's ever known you that well, paint and all, and still wanted you to get up? The question's still open. So is the door.

. . .

You're going to close this soon. You'll probably put them back in. Your thumb already knows where to go.

There's going to be a half second before it gets there. The same one from the very first page. The little bit of nothing that feels like cold air coming in under a door.

A painted door doesn't let any air through.

That cold is coming from somewhere.

Acknowledgments

For anybody who has ever stood in front of a painted door and felt the cold coming from somewhere else.

And for the voice that goes out over the rooftops before dawn. It has been saying the same words every morning for fourteen hundred years. If you've ever wondered what it says is better than sleep, the answer isn't hard to find.

3 : 2 1

Just Real Enough

by A. Still

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justrealenough.site

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