

CHAP. I

Football



EVER.

Never in a million years.

But it happened.

* * *

Crashed on the turf, wearing his lucky Pittsburgh Steelers Hall of Famer Donnie Shell Number Thirty-One jersey, Walthner Twohey Walls reveled in the last play of the game. He had just batted away what would have been the winning touchdown for the Simon Hall intramural team, stacked with the best athletes from the school, ready to claim the Toilet Bowl trophy for the sixteenth consecutive year. But they came up one play short. Young Hall—derisively called Dung Hall—would now proudly display the porcelain throne in their common area and would, for the first time, not be found floating in it. Their team had won.

Shouts of “Hey-Hey, you did it!” from teammates caught up in the thrill of the moment drowned out the other voices, in his head, which if acknowledged—*those thoughts no one in their right mind wants to hear*—wouldn’t be understood, much less acted upon.

Walt was desperate to block out his thoughts—to connect with his team, with the other students, with anyone—but the voices came back. Whence they came he did not know.

Blood makes the grass grow greener.

As below, so above.

Hidden in plain sight.

The voyce of thy brothers blood cryeth unto me, from the ground.

Am I my brother's keeper?

Your nose is always in a book; open your eyes and see.

The answer lies under your feet.

Felt but not heeded, spoken but not heard, confrontational yet always avoided, these phrases echoed into the emptiness of the willful deaf.

The words that he would not hear were those of the little boy who had been slain. Walt was one of the few on campus empathetic enough to hear the crying voyce of his blood, but it was drowned out by the din of the game and his relentless refusal to listen.

Most people live in the outside world, but I'm here in my own. Inside. Other people speak; I think. They make things happen; things happen to me. My dad always said, "Live and learn—some people just live." I'm sorry, Dad, but most of the time I'm just trying to live, and the things that I learn, they hurt. I'm tired of the pain. Tired of being alone. We just won this game, and here I am. Thinking too much, by myself, again.

"For there is nothing couered, that shall not be reueiled; and hidde, that shall not be knownen."

Many readers have already figured out why Walt's nickname was Hey-Hey, as they know that words can have One meaning, oft Two, and sometimes hidden ones as well. They search for the clues, which, when found, are more precious than buried treasure.

Meanings also hide behind words spoken ingest.



Stories are written,
 Tails are tolled.
 Counting is crucial,
 Truth is Gold.
 Leafing tomorrow,
 Living today,
 The sun is shining,
 Best make, Hey.
 Sounds are deceiving,
 Measuring depths,
 Spellings are lies,
 Bones in crypts.



Bones en-crypts.
 In-script-ions.
 33 Dee-crypts.
 The answer. Lies under your feet.

CHAP. II

Ai



VERY few people have heard of Credence University, a small Christian college on the island of Ai. It could have been in any town or city in the United States, or, for that matter, anyplace in the world. But it chose to be in Ai.

Ai: name as peculiar as the isle itself; the residents know not from whence it came.

The island had only one port, and it was visible from Young Hall. From time to time the Ship would come in and unload its cargo of persons and goods.

No one had ever seen the Ship leave.

Ai. Two vowels, no consonants, one syllable. *I*.

The cattlemen on Ai were renowned for their exquisite breed creation, and they used artificial insemination—AI—in the regular course of events. Though they were comfortable with using frozen semen to influence their herds, they were unwilling to make the leap to believing that AI might have been the genesis of their own ancestors. Twenty or so years prior, AI mania had swept the island like the tulips had Holland, with frigid straws of bovine DNA commanding a year's wages or more. Many of the dairymen argued vociferously that the island's name and the process were related, but the townsfolk found the notion ludicrous.

Some islanders thought the moniker *Ai* was technological in genesis, referring to artificial intelligence, some heartless machine governing the affairs of the land and its people. Their argument was silently refuted by the ancient architecture that dotted the island. Computers were a recent phenomenon, but the massive stone buildings were a silent testimonial to the antiquity of the island's settlements.

Ai was not named after the sounds created by a three-toed sloth from South America. There was no jungle to support such wildlife, and Brazil was a world away.

Twice a year at Credence, the argument broke out that *of course* the island was named after the city that Joshua destroyed in the Old Testament. Like clockwork. Fall and spring. The idea usually had its genesis in the Intro to OT class, where the book of Joshua was required reading. Joshua and his army first fought the famous battle of Jericho, and their next campaign was against the city of Ai, where the Israelites suffered a setback. This was where some of the students would jump to the conclusion that somehow their island was connected to the ancient city. The argument always collapsed when they read that all the residents of the city were killed and "all the inhabitants were utterly destroyed." Then the king was hung. And the text continued, saying, "Joshua burnt Ai, and made it an heap for ever, *even* a desolation unto this day."

One student would ultimately and decisively say something like, "I'm right, you see. Ai is desolate to this day. Must've been a different Ai!"

The students at CU looked at *to this day* as a literal binding prophecy that Ai couldn't and wouldn't be rebuilt; therefore, it was not related to their home at all. The heated arguments would lose their steam and become as flat and stale as two-day-old Coke, and the debate, likewise, poured out and forgotten.

(Walt and some of his fellow literature hounds had read Joshua in the King James translation and had noted similarities with the works of Shakespeare. The KJV was first printed in 1611, contemporaneous with the bard. Debates have raged within the intelligentsia for years, but the phrase "an heap for ever, *even* a desolation" does have the ring of the word-smith, the playwright. And so too does the soaring poetry in the psalms.

“Know ye that the LORD, hee *is* God, *it is* he *that* hath made vs, and not we our selues: *wee are* his people, and the sheepe of his pasture.” The italicized words, *which the translators added to the text*, once removed, nullify the lilt and grace that the poet licensed into the translation. “*It is* he *that* hath made vs”: transcendent. “He hath made us”: simple, banal, and a boring commentary lacking both rhythm and rhyme.)

The main feature of the island was the pretentious Mount Ai that commanded every view. Its head was bald and forever covered in icy hoar. Unknown: that was what was lurking under that frigid hat, as it had never been doffed for any occasion, not for the highest potentate or even the most beautiful woman passing by. There were four seasons elsewhere on the isle, though where Credence was situated, winter temperatures were somewhat mitigated by the warmer waters of the ocean.

Mount Ai generated a magnetic field unlike anything else on earth. Its effect was on humans; it had been this way forever. This field blocked most unpleasant memories and curtailed freedom of thought, dominating the mindscape of the population.

Some years ago an earthquake had epicentered on the mountain, with resulting avalanches and flooding, but the subtlest reminder and remainder was the Crack. This fissure was quite large at elevation, but as it wended down the mount, it decreased until it reached its terminus, which was at the base of the 1611 tome cradled on its stand in the quadrangle of Credence. A year later, the expanding split in the stony Bible had separated the words “is profitable” from “All Scripture.”

As subtle as the void was, even less detectable was the shift in consciousness as a scattered few people began to remember events from their past.

Ai was Ai, because Ai have always been; but change, inevitable.

CHAP. III

Kickback Area



OST days in the fall and spring, students would congregate on the grassy knoll above the cafeteria to study. When he was still the eager student in his second year, Walt had arrived before most everyone and had claimed the high ground on the hill, under the shade of an ancient oak. He was engrossed in a book for one of his sophomore requirements, ENG 205: Literature, Story, Novels.

He was wrapped up in his own little world, but another was operational a few yards down the hill from him, and the two planets were on a collusion course.

* * *

Harmony Duncan had finally met a man who was interested in her. She was with him on the kickback area. They had met in Psych 101. He'd asked her a few of his patented questions. At first she was shy, not used to having anyone pay any attention to her, especially young men, and was unsure of herself, awkward; but soon she found it easy to answer Dean Rhodebeaver.

That spring day, she was basking in the sun, lying on her back, her bare feet and calves luxuriating in the green swords tickling her skin. But more warming than the sun, and touching her more softly than the exquisite tender grass, was the gentle probing from her new friend, propped up on one elbow next to her.

"Harmony. It's such a beautiful name. Why did your parents choose that for you?"

Dean listened intently to her response, thought carefully, then said, "Is that why you work so hard to get along with everybody?"

Finally, someone was asking her about her feelings and her emotions, her past, her history! She opened her heart to his queries, and the words started to tumble out.

When she was done, Dean continued. "You're majoring in mathematics. Do you want to work in industry? Teach?"

Joyous emotion flowed from her lips as she shared her love for math and the gift she had. She spoke for a full five minutes, Dean rapt around her words.

"Do you have a dream?"

Harmony took a long time to gather her thoughts and then let fly. She finally was the center of a man's universe, her euphoria releasing ancient dammed-up sentiment to flow unimpeded over the spillway of her tongue. She talked, Dean focused on her every word, both blissfully unaware of the dark cumulonimbi building up overhead, the waters soon to inundate and engulf their lives.

* * *

Meanwhile, uphill, Walt waded deeper into chapter 2 of *The Anatomy of Genres*. His hands started shaking, the lifelines of his palms morphing into rivulets of sweat.

Hmm, I'd never thought about this. The Bible as horror? I guess I could see that, with the serpent tricking Adam and Eve. But the author is broaching heresy when he writes "Enter God the Father, the couple's second opponent. They lose their immortality... This father is a tyrant. When his children make the mistake of wanting to understand their world and themselves, their punishment is to be driven out of paradise."

He made a mental note to talk to his professor about this, to ask why he'd chosen a textbook that was so contrary to the prevailing thought of the school. He read the two pages again and noticed something obvious the writer had missed.

"They were expelled from the garden so that they cannot eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge and live forever." Couldn't they afford a proofreader? Everyone knows that it was the tree of life that they were kept from! I knew that when I was six in Vacation Bible School!

Walt gloated, his glee at the error suppressing the dread that had invaded his psyche with the thought of God as Antagonist.

He needed a break. Walt noticed a photographer lying in the grass about forty feet away, her lens pointed somewhat in his direction. He thought little of it and went back to his book to see what else Mr. Truby had to say about horror novels and movies. "Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son on God's orders." Walt shrugged his shoulders and kept on reading, not allowing any of the words to penetrate the world that he had created for himself.

* * *

On Friday, the school newspaper came out, half the front page brandishing a picture of Harmony and Dean. The photographer had gotten just the right angle/angel to make it look like Dean was atop her, and the title of the scathing hit piece was "A Time to Embrace, and a Time to Refrain from Embracing."

Some sixty years ago, the exact same words, from the exact same book of Ecclesiastes, had stormed the shores of Ai. "To Everything There Is a Season (Turn! Turn! Turn!)" had become wildly popular all over the island, and swarms of Credence students sat around campfires on the beach with their guitars, singing the beautiful lyrics inspired by the wisdom of David's son. Those idyllic evenings, the warmth of their emotions captured by their smoky clothing, had filled the crew-cut and bobby-soxed coeds with a rush of hope and excitement. (The campus as a whole never really took to the other biblically inspired hit song in the US, Sister Janet Mead's version of the Lord's Prayer, even though it topped out at #4. But they made up for it and then some by adopting "Kum Ba Yah" as an unofficial anthem during its revival in the 1970s.)

But that newspaper article. It rocked and rolled through the campus, with angry and arguing students in its wake. Nobody knew the intent of the writer or the photographer, so wild suppositions were drawn. Was it a screed against the junior class president, Ezekiel Younge, and his hands-on partner, Adrianne Adder, the most flagrant violators of the school's

unwritten No-Public-Display-of-Affection Policy? Sides were taken, pro and con, for and against the infamous duo. Others saw it as an attack on their secret, ever-present, but unfulfilled desires, an overreach by the paper into their very personal thoughts and feelings. Most of the theology majors banded together in support of what they believed to be a long-overdue correction to the way things seemed to be headed at the college.

Harmony hid in her room the whole weekend. Her roommates were as supportive as they could be.

"You're smart. Maybe the best thing to do is to throw yourself into your books and let this go."

"Be proud of yourself, girl. Don't let those jerks get you down. You're bigger than this."

"Ignore them. You didn't do anything wrong."

Harmony said, "I hate the paper, I hate this school, and I hate myself. Everyone thinks I'm a slut. I hate my life, I hate the looks I know I'll get, I hate everything."

She blocked Dean's number.

Finally relenting to the pressure of her friends, she went to class, but the hot blood pounding in her head and ears drowned out all chances of learning. She avoided Dean like the plague and refused to go to Psych 101.

Dean ambushed her on her way out of chapel on Wednesday.

"I've been calling and texting. What's up with you? I thought we were friends."

"You're right. You always have to be right. We were friends. Not anymore. I don't ever want to see you again. Stop calling me. I've blocked you anyway. I just want to be left alone," she screamed at him.

"I just wanted to say..."

But Harmony was already ten feet away, tears flowing unabated, and her departure sucked the air out of Dean's lungs, leaving his apology unvoiced.

* * *

The uproar surrounding the photo and the article was so vociferous that the college president made the unusual move of holding an open forum to

try and squelch the rage fomented by the school rag. It was to be held in the chapel on Thursday evening at 7:00 p.m. Chairing the discussion was Dean of Students Drystan Squires. The editor of the newspaper, Kailey Burnes, was one member of the panel, and the other was Chadwick Reymont, student government representative for the senior class.

The chapel was about one-fourth full. There was a lot of interest.

Dean Squires started the session.

“Last week the school newspaper addressed a topic that has been long ignored by this institution. Credence is a school founded on the ideals of the Bible. The sanctity of marriage and the preservation of the sacred relationship that is only to occur between man and wife after they are married will always be foremost for the administration and faculty of this school. I should not have to remind you that you each signed a letter of agreement to uphold these standards while you are students at this august institution.

“It has also come to my attention that there is a lot of disagreement regarding this situation, and it is my heart’s desire to broker a peaceful resolution so that the work of the university and its students can again flow smoothly, as they always have. We will hear first from Editor Burnes, then Representative Reymont, and then I will open the floor for questions. Miss Burnes?”

She stood boldly, defiantly, and, at least in the eyes of a few of the students, it looked like she was trying to act like a man. There was not much femininity in her behavior or in her dress. She wasn’t wearing a dress or skirt as many of the coeds did—she had on khaki slacks, a pinpoint oxford button-down shirt, a man’s tie, and a navy blue sports coat. Wing-tipped shoes were on her feet, to boot.

“It has been a long-standing problem here at Credence, young men taking advantage of the naivete of the good-hearted women of this school. They have learned to press the advantage afforded by the repressive nature of this institution and have thrived at manipulating the fairer sex through their charms and wiles. We’re not going to take it anymore. The staff at the newspaper is well aware of this phenomenon, and I was the one responsible for the idea of the story. We decided to do what was needed so that visitors

to our campus would not feel like they were stepping onto the set of a B-grade movie or, worse, a porno film.”

At these words, Dean, the subject and unwitting poseur of the debated picture, had to stifle his response. Decorum was important, and she did have the floor; but to Dean, the floor was covered in the vomit of her words and those of her paper, and he could smell the puke dripping from his hair as she swabbed the deck with his swirling head.

She continued with her die-a-tribe and succeeded in angering half the audience and alienating quite a few more. The longer she spoke, the louder the murmurings and mutterings grew, and Dean Squires broke in to ask her a question.

“Miss Burnes, if you had the insight that you have today, if you could go back in time, would you still run this story?”

“Yes, sir, I would. No regrets.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but your time is up. We will now hear from Mr. Reymont.”

Chadwick stood and said that he agreed with the intent and the idea behind the article but that it might have been much wiser to not have made the picture the focal point. “In fact,” he said, “it would have been much more effective to not have included the picture at all. Everyone here knows who is most egregious in PDAs, and calling them out by name—or worse, using likenesses of others to prove a point—is nothing more than yellow journalism.”

As he spoke, louder rumblings of assent rose from the more vocal members of the audience. He spoke for a few more minutes and concluded, “It is my recommendation that the paper retract the story and write an apology to Dean and Harmony, whose names and faces they were so eager to publish and whose reputations they besmirched.”

The dean of students rose to open the floor to questions. There were those regarding privacy that neither he or the editor chose to address head-on—circumlocution—and their beating around the burning bush only served to fan its flames. The students were getting more and more irate.

Chadwick asked, “Kailey, do you have a copy of their signed release on file allowing you to share their likenesses? Did you or anyone in the paper

even bother to ask Harmony or Dean to print their picture?" The seniors who had voted for him appreciated that he was doing a great job of representing, and a few of them stood and clapped.

The students fired questions, but the responses from Kailey and the dean let them know that if they continued, they might be next in line, humiliated by the paper, the administration, or both.

Finally, the dean stood and made a pronouncement. "In the morning, I will be making a recommendation to the administration to support the newspaper and its staff, and I strongly encourage the student population to adhere more closely to both the spirit and the letter of the law regarding public and private displays of affection. Thank you all for coming."

Students grumbled as they shuffled to the exits, but Walt jumped to his feet and spoke clearly, firmly, and with volume that carried his voice and his conviction throughout the chapel. He needed no microphone.

"I was eyewitness to the event in question. I had the perfect vantage point, as I was sitting about fifteen feet uphill from Harmony and Dean. My attention was drawn to the photographer, a snake in the grass to get the angel that served her purposes, and I stand here today to say that those two were not fondling, embracing, or even touching each other. They were conversing as friends have every right to do, next to each other, and I was stunned to see what the newspaper created out of parallax and thin air. Is it worth destroying two innocents to uphold an ideal, to belabor a point? Support the paper if you will, but I will stand in defense of the truth!"

Drystan kept his composure. It took all the restraint he had. Dean Squires knew more about Walt and his family than Walt and his father combined had known, and the dean both feared and hated Walt more than any living soul. Walt was his biggest threat to power and didn't even know it. Right now he was just Don Quixote on a Tilt-A-Whirl, an English major with a propensity for bad jokes, perennially hung up on Miss Unobtainium. But if Drystan's enemies made the right moves...

The dean thought, *That can't be allowed to happen. Even if I can't touch him, I can ensure that he will never rise to power. It's mine, all mine...*

Student lackeys of the administration hurried to herd the students out. Accustomed to being ushered at church, they meekly, if begrudgingly, made their way out of the chapel, and major confrontation was avoided.

* * *

The following day, Walt opened his mailbox.

An official letter from the school?

There were more pressing needs, and he didn't open the letter until he'd returned from the bathroom.

Master Walthner Twohey Walls:

This institution was founded and will remain firmly seated on the foundation of the Holy Writ, and it will not tolerate in any manner such disregard to the truths that the wisest man in the world chose to impart to ignorant humanity.

This body will not allow a mere student to desecrate that which is Sacred.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."

This truth is not up for debate. A wise man will ponder, consider, and choose wisely, as well as heed the words of the great King, who also wrote:

"A time to be born, *and a time to die.*"

I repeat, "a time to be born, *and a time to die.*"

Wisdom continues,

"A time to heal, *and a time to kill.*"

"A time to love, *and a time to hate.*"

"A time of peace, *and a time of war.*"

Solomon's message could not be clearer, but this is not the totality of his teachings.

"A time to speak, *and a time to keep silence.*"

You would have done well to have heeded his last warning. Silence is golden. Sometimes wisdom is so simple. "Shut up and get rich." You will learn, and you need to hold on to these truths for the rest of your life.

There is one more thing that King Solomon wished to impart for your edification. "Curse not the king, no not in thy thought, and *curse not the rich in thy bed-chamber: for a bird of the aire shall carry the voyce, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.*"

Not only does the King know your words, he knows your very thoughts. He knows your depravity, down to the detail of your dreams.

Scrawled below were the words that served as a signature.

Monita Regis observant sapientes.

The floor rose to the ceiling, crushing the young student, his dreams, and his ambition. Walt threw himself on his bed, vainly trying to use blankets to defeat the chill that had frozen him.

Harmony? She was so hurt by the ordeal that she decided that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. She found a man willing and eager to father a child, dropped out of school at the end of the semester, having already gotten a commitment from her now-fiancé to marry her. The positive pregnancy test was the nudge he needed, and they moved to the far end of the island, happy to be out of range of the school's newspaper.

* * *

"Hey, Walt, thanks for standing up for me and Harmony."

"Sure!"

Ten simple words, a response.

Friendship.