

PART I



1.

IT WAS ONLY AFTER HENDLEY WAS BOMBED THAT LEE was forced to admit to himself just how much he'd disliked him: a raw, never-mined vein of thought in an instant laid bare by the force of explosion. Of course, it was typical in his profession for diminishing elders to harbor ill-will toward their junior colleagues. But Lee, who had been tenured in his department for more than twenty years, felt that he was exempt from the obsolescence that infected most other professors his age. He was still capable of the harsh princeliness he'd possessed in his youth, although now he was half through his sixties, and his hair was all white. That old aristocratic hauteur would return suddenly, and his loose, dowdy trousers, always belted too high, would seem to sit on a younger man's waist. The liver spots that had come to his face would be bleached by the glare pouring forth from his eyes. His wasn't the kind of temperament spouse or child or friend had ever wanted to cleave to, but for his students it had the power to impress; like most of their peers, they found the notion of mentorship fusty. Unlike Lee in his own student days, they shunned the emeritus aura. They mostly wanted teachers who acted like pals—this was why they'd loved Hendley—but they didn't scorn Lee quite as much, he felt sure, as they did the other professors his age, the old men with their elbow-patched tweeds, and their stay-at-home wives who made cookies and tea for the very few students who still bothered to seek professorial counsel.

Then again, there were times he was forced to believe the exact opposite: that his students had neither respect nor affection for him. He sat idle during his twice-weekly office hours, as did most of his aged colleagues, a crisp yellow legal pad squared before him on his clean desk, a Montblanc fountain pen with black ink in his hand—he'd always worked in black ink, an affectation he'd suffered since youth. A sign of arrogance, his first wife might have said; of humility, he might have parried. Ink kept one's errors on record. But whatever his Montblanc denoted, there were fewer and fewer to give their opinions. His office hours were an empty detention, unvisited and unproductive for him, no matter how he pretended. Each afternoon he would carefully stand the door open twelve inches, or the width someone needed to duck in casually and say hi; not wide open, as if in eager anticipation, and not merely slightly ajar, as if he begrudged this time for his students. He didn't; he sat poised on the brink of the legal pad, seemingly lost in his putative thoughts, the Montblanc in his fingers. Each set of footsteps he heard in the hallway launched him on a theatrical scratching of pen upon notepad; he would feel his face stiffen with self-consciousness and will his eyes not to dart toward the door. The footsteps were almost never for him. The rare occasions they were, he was always the same, as if reluctantly drawn from the pool of deep thought: "Ah," he would say, tempering his forbidding absorption with a lift of the eyebrows. But most often, as he twitched with unsure expectation, the footsteps passed his office—his door too little open for him to see who it was—and instead stopped at Hendley's, next door. There would already be lively murmur of whispers, students sprawled on the floor of the hall with their backpacks, awaiting their turns. And through the wall, the not-quite-comprehensible but very audible rumble of Hendley himself, holding forth, and a student's unself-conscious laughter, punctuated by the robotic bleeps and the primitive honks Hendley's two huge computers gave off.

His dislike of Hendley was all the more painful to him for his having until now been ignorant of it. Had he known, he might have forgiven himself his eager awkwardness in the face of Hendley's camaraderie, the oh-yeses he would hear himself helplessly blurting whenever Hendley found him at their faculty coffee events. As Lee carefully blew on his thin paper cup, Hendley would clap him on the

shoulder so the hot coffee jumped, as if Lee were the person he'd most hoped to see. Hendley would launch into a long anecdote as if Lee were the person he'd most wanted to hear it, as if theirs were the sort of friendship that required no work, in which all was assumed. And in response Lee would hear himself saying "Oh, yes," would feel his head bobbing in dumb agreement, as if the past forty years hadn't happened and he was fresh off the boat with ten phrases of English etched painstakingly in his mind. His dislike of Hendley might have prepared him somewhat, if not for what happened, then at least for the dislike itself, the cold shock of his first, addled thought when he'd felt the vast fist of the detonation, like a bubble of force that had popped in his face. He'd felt his heart lurch, begin to flop in disorder and fear; he'd seen with his own eyes his wall of university-issue bookcases, the cheap metal kind with adjustable shelves, seem to ride the wall separating his office from Hendley's as if they were liquid, a wave. He had waited an endless instant, the eon between beats of his heart, for those bookcases so laden with waxy math texts to crash down in one motion and kill him, but they somehow had not. The explosion—he'd known right away it was a bomb; unlike almost all of his colleagues, he knew the feel of bombs intimately—had somehow not breached the thin wall through which, day after day, he'd heard Hendley's robust voice and his bleeping computer and the strange, gooselike yodel of Hendley's dial-up modem when it reached its objective. The explosion had not breached the wall, so that the work it had wrought on the far side was left for Lee to imagine, as he felt the force wash over him, felt his heart quail, and felt himself briefly thinking, *Oh, good.*

The bomb had arrived in a small, heavy cardboard box with the Sun Microsystems logo and address printed on it, but afterward it had been apparent to investigators, as it might have been to Hendley, had he examined the box with suspicion, that it had been reused—recycled, repurposed. A second layer of clear tape had been carefully laid on the first along the seam of the top set of flaps; the first length of tape had been slit neatly open by a previous, unharmed recipient. In the same way the mailing label addressed to Hendley had been the second, at least, for this box; but the previous label had been carefully peeled away, leaving only a soft fuzz of slightly abraded cardboard the second

label had easily hidden. Hendley had ordered nothing from Sun Microsystems at the time the box came to his office, but he was someone who easily might have, and who often enjoyed getting free innovative gizmos. He was a university professor at a midwestern state school only recently somewhat renowned, and only specifically for the computer-science branch of the math department, of which Hendley was chair. But he was also, to that part of the public that followed his work, an exemplar of a new breed of professor, worldly, engaged, more likely to publish in a magazine full of ads for a mysterious item called Play-Station than in a moribund university quarterly, read only by the frail, graying men (and rare woman) whose work was included that month. Lee knew that Hendley considered his appointment as chair of the computer-science division, for which he was paid far more than most other tenured professors, to be part charity, part evangelism; charity on the rare days when he grasped he was snubbed by the real mathematicians or held forth on his homesickness for the West Coast; evangelism, pure and exalting, on more typical days, when his work—not only “midwifing an unprecedented information-technology age that would transform the world as completely as had the industrial revolution” but also “revitalizing the dying university”—made him feel like “the luckiest man in the world,” even, these self-satisfied outbursts implied, mired at the featureless midpoint between the two coasts, on a faculty that was, other than him, laughable. Hendley was unique among his colleagues in gaily asserting what the rest of them sought to deny: that the rest of the school’s departments were considered subpar by the rest of the schools in the country, an assessment that included the math department of which Lee was a member.

Hendley had been alone in his office when he opened the box; Lee had known that Hendley was alone, would later realize that he had always been accurately and painfully aware of whether Hendley had student admirers in his office or not. At that hour Hendley had had his door closed to students, in part to devote himself to his mail. Lee, at his own desk, had had his own door open not the usual twelve inches—it had not been during office hours—but the inch and a half that allowed the pale light from his green-shaded lamp to sift slenderly into the hall and that would embolden anyone who sought him—office hours or not—to hazard a knock. Thus far on that day, no one had. The force of

the explosion threw Lee from his chair, so that he found himself curled not quite under but against the cold metal flank of his desk. For all that he'd lived through a violent and crude civil war, he'd never been this close to the heart, the hot core, of a bomb. He'd been in the vicinity of far more powerful explosives, such as left steaming holes in the ground—and of course, if he'd been as close, barely ten feet away, to any one of those bombs as he'd been to Hendley's, he would not have lived to feel Hendley's at all. But he had never been so close to a detonation, to that swift bloom of force, regardless of size, in his life.

After the explosion Lee remained on the floor of his office, his body pressed to his desk, his eyes closed; they weren't screwed shut in terror, just closed, as if he were taking a nap. The building's automatic sprinkler system had been activated by the blast, and now regular, faintly chemical rain sifted down upon Lee with an unending hiss. Lee did not register the disorder of noise taking form in the hallway: the running feet, toward and away; the first shattering scream. The first person to get to Hendley was an undergraduate named Emma Stiles from Vinton, Iowa, who worked two days a week in the math department as an office assistant and who had been walking back from the women's bathroom when the bomb detonated. Emma Stiles was a known acolyte of Hendley's. If Lee had had the leisure to think as he lay on the tile, he might have thought that Emma had taken her job, which was dull as work-study jobs went, because it brought her into regular, casual, exclusive contact with Hendley. On her days in the department, Emma Stiles only worked from twelve-thirty to four-thirty, at which time the department officially closed, but she had won the privilege of using the student-assistant computer after hours to go on the Internet, a mysterious process the full-time secretaries did not understand but assumed was akin in some way to vocational training. Emma Stiles worked hard and so was very well liked, and she'd made a second home for herself in the math department, especially on the bright afternoons of April, when a four-thirty end to the workday felt like a vacation because there was still so much daylight, now that they'd finally come out of winter. On such afternoons Emma Stiles, walking down the deserted hallway amid great blocks of amber-hued light, betwixt spinning dust motes, past surviving ficuses trembling parched in their pots, often heard Professor Hendley call out, "Stiles!

Come in here, you have *got* to see this.” From next door Lee would hear it as well: man-boy Hendley, curly-bearded and wire-spectacled like a John Lennon throwback, but in strange rubber sandals that closed with Velcro, and shirts you might see on a skateboarding freshman. Hendley was well known by his colleagues and students to have a girlfriend named Rachel who taught media studies, whatever that meant, and who flew back and forth as often as three times a month between San Francisco and the landlocked hamlet to which Hendley had moved, to lead the moldering world of scholarship into the digital age. So that in terms of the intangible, sexual taint of which nobody spoke, but which everyone feared, Hendley also was somehow immune, both further beyond suspicion than a hunchbacked, half-blind ninety-year-old might have been and uniquely privileged to be comfortable where no other professor dared tread. Hendley played Ultimate Frisbee with his male and female students and had parties at which he served beer. He seemed always to be in the company of a young person, as often a girl as a boy, in his office in the early evenings, where they tip-tapped and clicked and erupted with laughter in response to whatever they’d done. To be fair, Emma Stiles just as often made her way past an office door that was closed, a bright stripe of light from the low-hanging sun showing at the threshold. Hendley would be sitting behind the closed door, window blinds halfway down to take the glare off his screen; at this time of day, the sun was so low its light stretched the length of the floor, seeped beneath the closed door, made Emma’s feet cast long, rubbery shadows on the opposite wall. In Lee’s office the sun was allowed the full window, and Lee watched his own shadow stretch toward the opposite wall, the door on which nobody knocked. It was past six P.M., but the sun wouldn’t go down until seven; the sounds of Hacky Sack and Frisbee and touch football sifted in from outdoors. The last wire cart of mail had been pushed down the hallway, its contents dispersed, around four. Often Hendley left his huge influx of mail, his complimentary gadgets and disks and slick trade publications, in the opaque white bins they arrived in, and the bins piled up on each other. Hendley joked that he was waiting for amnesty day at the post office, when he could return the white bins, which weren’t for use by the public, without being arrested.

On the days Hendley did open mail, he opened the most recent mail first and worked backwards from there. Why not respond to a few things on time, rather than everything late? Hendley apparently wasn't much moved by degrees of lateness, an indifference with which Lee agreed. The box that held the bomb had arrived that same day and been handled by an unknowable number of people before being delivered to Hendley's office. It was designed to go off when opened, which meant it might have lain dormant forever in Hendley's unopened mail. The ambulances arrived first, and then the police and the bomb squad; it was the bomb squad that found Lee, sitting up by that time, with his back to his desk, his legs straight out on the cold tile floor, his gaze riveted forward, but empty. Later he would tell the police he had known, without doubt, that the bomb must have come in the mail. That rhythm, so deeply ingrained in Lee's being: the last mail of the day, the last light stretching shadows across the cold floor, the silence that grew deeper around him as the revelry in Hendley's office began. Loneliness, which Lee possessed in greater measure and finer grade than did his colleagues—of that he was sure—made men more discerning; it made their nerves like antennae that longingly groped in the air. Lee had known that the bomb had come in the mail because he had known that only an attack of mail-related scrupulosity would have kept Hendley in his office with the door shut on a spring day as warm and honey-scented as this day had been; Hendley was a lonely man, too, in his way. Their lonelinesses were different, but Lee saw the link. Hendley loved to be loved; there was never enough to put an end to his restless quest for it. While Lee had taken every impulse of love ever directed at him and destroyed it somehow. Because the neighboring office was quiet, Lee knew that Hendley must be alone; because Hendley was alone, he knew that Hendley was opening mail; because Hendley was opening mail, Lee knew it was that day's mail, freshly arrived. Then the bomb, and Lee's terrible gladness: that something was damaging Hendley, because Hendley made Lee feel even more obsolete and unloved. It had been the gross shock of realizing that he felt glad that had brought him to sitting, from being curled on the floor, and that had nailed his gaze emptily to the opposite wall. He was deep in disgusted reflection on his own pettiness when the bomb squad found him, but, unsurprisingly, they had assumed he was simply in shock.