

## PROLOGUE

OCTOBER 15, 1918

THE two soldiers left Macauley's general store with their sacks of black licorice and hard molasses candies and sat down on the bench just outside the door to watch the life of the village moving past. They were tall and lanky and fair-complexioned young men and in their handsome, high-collared uniforms they resembled one another very closely. One was nineteen, the other was twenty. The twenty-year old bore a prominent scar, the feature that distinguished them, which ran beneath his lower lip like a plump white worm.

They lit cigarettes and smoked in a relaxed silence. They greeted the people passing by, tipping their caps to the women and nodding to the men, returning crisp salutes to those who crisply gave them. Their voices when they said hello were high-pitched and respectful. People were surprised, a few even startled, to come upon the two of them, these look-alike soldiers enjoying the ideal autumn sun. There was, in their handsomeness and the occasion of their being there, an aura of something like celebrity about them. And only later, as the shocking news spread, did people think to ask how they'd found their way from wherever they were camped on a Tuesday afternoon to that bench in front of Macauley's store.

As the soldiers sat there, a bird, a squawking blue jay, flew overhead and shat, hitting the small spot of bench between the two of them. They burst out laughing and began to argue about whether the bird had found or missed its target. Maybe it had been a sharpshooter taking morning target practice, aiming for that very spot and hitting it exactly. Or maybe it had flown all the way across the ocean, trained by the Huns to patrol America's skies, to look down for anyone in a uniform to shit on.

They sat a few minutes more, softly chuckling, pleased with their silliness, until the soldier with the scar said he was feeling light-headed. At the same time, he was having trouble getting his breath. He'd started smoking just a few days before and he knew the cigarette was the reason for his dizziness, and for the sense that his chest was suddenly closing. He flicked the cigarette away, *Goddamn weeds, why'd I start?* and ground it beneath his boot. He reached into his uniform's tunic pocket for his handkerchief and coughed wetly into it and the cloth came away streaked luridly with blood. His friend helped him to stand and asked an old woman who'd stopped to gawk for directions to a doctor. The house was fortunately close by and when they got to the address they were told by the shy widow who helped the doctor run his office that he'd left an hour ago, a house call in the country.

As they sat waiting in the parlor, the soldier with the scar was growing very frightened and working not to show it, and after a while he turned to his friend and told him he should leave. That he'd be fine and they would both be in trouble if one of them didn't report back to their unit and explain what had happened.

His friend rose with some reluctance and said he was sure their lieutenant would tell him to return right away bearing orders for where to rejoin them the next day.

The soldier with the scar said he was sure of this, too.

Left alone with the shy widow, who thought to bring him tea, he felt free to gasp desperately for breath, furious rhythms of breath, and after a while, from inside the first of the delusions he would suffer, he heard the gawking old lady who'd given them directions telling him he'd done right to send his friend away.

He died early that evening, lying on the office cot, bathed in sweat, the doctor, just returned, holding a wash pan under his chin to catch the blood.

Word, of course, traveled swiftly through the town. Many more than had actually seen the young soldiers or been anywhere near them during their brief, sorrowful visit described passing the two of them, so memorably striking as they sat there on the bench.

As the news was repeated over and over, the soldiers became twins bearing an uncanny resemblance. To see them sitting next to one another outside Macauley's store was to have seen double. A few remembered noticing the prominent scar—*Have I got it right that he's the one 't died?*—and eventually this detail was folded into the lore as having been some sort of childhood accident, which the twin who'd suffered it was probably glad for, if not at first, then in time, since the scar was the thing that had made him separate from his brother.

People said the fact that one had caught the influenza and the other had not felt even more haunting since the young men were identical. Someone said it was as if the scar were a mark made by God to help Him remember which one to give the influenza to. This appealed to a few as biblically compelling, some vengeful Old Testament episode, and they eagerly passed it on. But most, when hearing it, said *Hogwash* and *What rubbish*. The influenza wasn't the Lord's doing and even if people look exactly alike, He hardly needs any help keeping them straight since He made us all to start with.

When word of the soldier's death reached Earl, he thought immediately of the supper table talk a few nights before, when he'd learned of their visit. How innocent, how ignorant, that conversation seemed to him now as he heard it in his head, the way they'd joked about the soldiers being there. And then, thinking of them being such a perfect pair, it inspired Earl to wonder, *Why the one and not the other?* And to imagine that the soldier who'd survived—wherever he'd disappeared to, wherever the unit was he needed to rejoin—must be asking that same thing. *Why him and not me too?*, and it did not occur to Earl that the soldier who'd apparently been spared might be dead by now from the influenza too.

Thinking more, thinking harder, Earl began to see it as an instance of his belief in life's fated randomness. This is where his thoughts took him, it's as far as they extended. It was as if with his embrace of the life he'd made his way to, he now saw it as impregnable, its pleasures immune, and the fear that should have seized his heart when he heard the news did not.

What came to mind instead was the morning in Chicago, when he was seventeen, the day he rode the elevated train, and looking from his seat into the tenement he was passing, he saw the filthy little urchin, that half-naked dreamer who appeared to want the world, standing at his window and waving madly at the train, and Earl waving back, as if waving to his twin.