

Wasserman sat in his car by Kettering Field until eight-twenty p.m. He could see their fire across the river. They stayed until it had died out completely. Merlin left first, climbing up the west bank of the Miami river. A unit tailed him to a house at the corner of Emmet and Linwood. There was a sticker on the door that said "multimedia." Merlin stayed there until just after six the next morning. Two hours and seventeen minutes after Merlin left, Lacy finished kissing Ben, and Ben left. He walked south along the river to the Main Street bridge. From there, a different unit tailed him, on foot, to the Front Street Coffeehouse, where he sat in the back room writing in a notebook. The tail drank coffee and read the paper until midnight, when the coffeehouse closed. At Wasserman's request, the tail waited outside to follow Ben to his next destination. He kept tabs on all sides of the building, but Ben never came out. The lights went off, the crew left. There was no Ben. Wasserman called Colonel White at 7:52 the next morning and asked Arnetta if Ben Harrison had showed up to homeroom. He had. After Ben left the river, Lacy stayed half an hour, then walked up the stairs in the embankment. Wasserman drove across the bridge, but Lacy was gone.

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The detective climbed down the stairs to the bottom of the embankment. The soles of his shoes sank when he stepped onto the mud. Flashlight in hand, one large evidence bag stuffed into the back pocket of his slacks, he came to the remnants of the fire. Kneeling on the piece of driftwood that had served as Lacy's seat, Wasserman realized he had forgotten to bring the shovel. The detective set the bag on the mud and spread it open. He scooped piles of ash with his hands and placed each one delicately in the bag. There were fragments of unburned film in two of the handfuls. When he had collected all he could collect by that method, Reuben Wasserman sifted through the thin layer of ash with the fingers of one hand and his flashlight in the other, making sure he hadn't missed anything.

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"Goin' to lunch?"

"No," the detective said.

"Want us to bring you something back?"

Wasserman didn't answer. He was reading the marble composition book that lay open on his lap. It was entirely blank except for the last page. That page contained written correspondence between Lacy Brothers and Sherman Brocious, as verified by an outside handwriting consultant, with respect to samples taken from Sherman's locker, and samples obtained from Lacy's English teacher. Reuben Wasserman was reading a passage that had been written by Sherman Brocious.

*He will make us, everyone will Follow, i believe in
the inevitability, in the freedom from will, i believe
in powerless conscience the invincibility of hunger,
i believe because He has shown clearly, He teaches
by example, groundwork, momentum, inertia*

The black, careful print of Sherman Brocius ended without a signature. Lacy's reply started on the same line.

I never worry about you, you know that. What you do, you do for yourself, by yourself. I know that no one can stop you. I want you to know that I will miss you, though. With tears and kisses for all time.
ME--

To which Sherman Brocius had written:

what we talked about before, what i said was a maybe, is needed, what i said i might need you to do, will you still do it?

Lacy responded:

Ben knows. I will do it, though.
ME--

And that was the end of the book. Reuben Wasserman had read those messages about forty times in the last two-and-a-half days. It was getting him nowhere. He had taken down the snake pictures. The light wall was empty, its lights off. Wasserman rubbed his forehead with one hand. He sighed.

"Got those prints for ya." The tech was holding out an oversized clasp envelope. Wasserman didn't move. The tech dropped the envelope on top of the pile.

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A woman screamed, "Hold on I'm on the phone!" Then, trying to sound seductive, she said, "Hello, this is Veronica Quinn. ... Mr. Wasserman? No, isn't he at school?"

The envelope that the tech dropped on Wasserman's desk had only contained one photograph. The detective was looking at it while he spoke with Merlin's mother. One of the fragments had been printable. You could tell by the edging that it was Kodak TMAX, the kind of film they used in Mrs. Dugan's photography class. The detective studied a roughly-triangular black-and-white image of two naked legs, visible from the feet to the knees. They were tightly bound with barbed wire. The barbs had punctured the skin and blood had dried around the punctures. The legs were lying on a bed of wet leaves. The consensus in the Department was that the picture had been taken either while they were still alive or shortly after they were killed. The weird thing was...it was two left legs.

Mrs. Quinn was crying on the other end of the phone. "I-- I--"

Wasserman said, "If he comes home, if you hear from him, call me right away."

"I will, I will." Her voice wavered. "Please find him, Mr. Wasserman."

Reuben wanted to say, "Don't jump the gun, we don't even know if he's really missing." But this was the mother. As it turned out, she wasn't jumping the gun. Over the next weeks, Reuben

Wasserman came to realize that it hadn't stopped with Paul M. Legris on that Friday of the first week of school. When no one had seen Merlin for seven days, Wasserman added "Merlin Charles Quinn" to his list of missing boys.

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Outside the door of Chamber C, Lacy snapped a picture of the detective. He took the camera out of her hands, set it on a table, and led her by the shoulders into the room. After she declined his beverage offer, Reuben Wasserman said, "Those were nice pictures you had in your bag."

"Did they help you with your case?"

"No."

"Well, I need them back," Lacy said, "He wants to see them."

"Who does?" Wasserman asked.

Lacy looked at him like he was stupid. "Ralph," she said.

"Who's Ralph?"

"My snake."

Wasserman stood up. "We want to protect you, Lacy."

"You do?"

"Yes, but in order to do that, I need to know what was on the rest of that film you burned last night."

Lacy shook her head gravely. No. "It is the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

Lacy whispered. "If anyone sees that film you will be unable to protect me."

"I already saw some of it. Our guys looked through the ashes of your fire this morning. The prints are on my desk."

Lacy grabbed his hand in both of hers. "Do not let anyone see those pictures."

"I can't necessarily promise that," he said. "What's on the rest of the film? ... Lacy. What's on the rest of the film."

"I cannot tell."

"Why not?"

"Sherman Brocious will kill me." Lacy started to cry, wiping her eyes with the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

"Sherman Brocious will kill you?"

"I would like to live a while longer, if I can," she sniffled.

Reuben crossed his legs. "Sherman Brocious's hands," he lowered his voice, "are in a jar in the morgue. Someone else's hands are in a jar right next to that, the ones from Tuesday, remember? Frankly, and I'm sorry this is the case, but frankly I don't think Sherman Brocious poses much of a threat to you." Reuben uncrossed his legs and leaned toward the girl. "What was it Sherman Brocious wanted you to do for him? ... Did he ask you to destroy that film? When did he give it to you?"

Lacy shook her head.

"Sherman Brocious threatened to kill you?"

Lacy nodded.

"When did he do that?"

"Tuesday."

Reuben blinked. "Tuesday?"

Lacy nodded.

"Where?"

"At the pool."

"Sherman Brocious...was at the cemetery...Tuesday." Then, reaching a state beyond incredulity, the detective lightened his tone. "What was Sherman Brocious doing in the cemetery on Tuesday?"

"Giving me the film."

"Tell me about it."

"We went to the pool."

"You knew he would be there?"

"He said he would meet me there sometime."

"Did Ben and Merlin see him, too?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"We were there for a while and then he came up the hill and told me to take the negatives from him. Then he left."

"You took the film from him?"

"I took it from the ground."

"He dropped it?"

"I guess so."

"Did he-- Did-- Did you see his arms?"

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

"There were no..."

"Were his hands missing?"

Lacy nodded.

"What did you say to each other?"

"He told me to get rid of the film. I asked him what was on it. He said I could look at it myself."

"Anything else?"

~

Lacy standing before a handless Sherman Brocious in the moon-dark of the cemetery. Ben and Merlin looking on from behind. Lacy bending to retrieve the film, smelling the wounds, the stubs of his arms.

Her saying, "I miss you."

Him saying, "I know."

Lacy stepping closer to the missing boy. "Why did you come here tonight?"

"Because," he said, "My mother told me to."