

"As far as I know, he's fine. I just want to talk with you about a few things I think might help ensure everything stays that way while we wrap this thing up."

"You're making progress, then? You probably can't talk about it."

"We're making some progress. But I do need you and your wife to pay extra attention to your son's whereabouts for the next...couple of weeks, at least."

"We already are."

"That's good, I'm glad to hear it. I think it would be wise not to let him go anywhere by himself for the time being. If it's not too much trouble, I suggest that either you or your wife drive him to and from school for a while."

"We have been taking him when we can. Is there something particular that I should know about?"

"Merlin was reported missing yesterday."

"He told us. Do you think-- Is there a possibility that Ben--"

"I don't have any reason specifically to think that anything's going to happen to Ben. I just want us all to be extremely cautious regarding your son. How does he seem...about Merlin?"

"He's been very sarcastic. He's probably worried."

"In a way I hate to make this next request, Mr. Harrison, but...I'll just say it. I don't think it would be wise for Ben to be alone with Lacy Brothers right now."

"Why is that?"

"I just don't think it would be a good idea."

"Okay, well, thanks."

Wasserman hung up. The side window of his car was foggy. He wiped the glass with his sleeve. The courtyard of Colonel White School for the Arts was empty. Wasserman dialed a number. He pressed "SEND."

A voice on the other end said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Brothers? This is Reuben Wasserman."

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At two minutes after ten o'clock Reuben noticed Francis La Sota come around from the side of the school. He disappeared behind another corner for about forty seconds, then came out, followed by a boy wearing a red sweatsuit and a bulky coat. Through the binoculars, Detective Reuben Wasserman read the label on the coat. It said, "Triple Fat Goose." The principal and the student crossed the teacher's parking lot. The door of the teacher's entrance opened, and Lacy Brothers and Ben Harrison stepped out. They let the steel door close behind them and started across the lot. They waved to the principal as they passed him, and the principal waved back. Lacy took a picture of Francis La Sota dragging his Triple Fat Goose back inside the building. Lacy and Ben continued across the parking lot away from the school. Wasserman looked on from half a block away. He mentally filed Francis La Sota under "One-Man Clusterfuck," and started the car.

They rode the bus from Salem and Wabash to Third and Main. From ten-thirty to just after one p.m., they stayed within a block of Courthouse Square. Lacy sat under a tree in the square. Ben went to the CVS across Main Street, then to Book Friends on Second. On his return trip he stood in line for a teller at the Provident branch in the lobby of the Mead building. Sixty feet from where he stood in line, Lacy sat under a tree writing in a spiral notebook that had holographic

fairies on the front cover. When he left the bank, Ben crossed the square, stopping to kiss Lacy on the head as she wrote. He went across Third Street to the food court at Third and Ludlow. He brought back a styrofoam tray of cheese coney. For the next hour, they ate, they both wrote and read, Lacy leaned against Ben and Ben put his arms around her. Lacy got up at one point and danced a circle around each of the trees in the square. Ben walked their food trash to a receptacle on the other side of Main street (there was a trash can twenty feet from the tree). Reuben Wasserman, having left his car on Ludlow between Second and Third, saw all of this from the stairway leading into the square from the Elder-Beerman parking lot, from the sidewalk across Main street from the square, and from two sides of the Bank One lobby on the second floor of the Kettering Tower. When Ben and Lacy left the square, Wasserman followed them on foot. He called the Department and arranged for someone to pick up the car. Lacy and Benjamin walked to Fifth Street. They went into All American Pawn. They walked up and down Sixth, Hess, and Green streets, twice each, before settling in the park. They spent twenty minutes in front of the property at 419 Sixth, which was for sale. They spoke excitedly to one another, pointing at the narrow balcony on the second floor. Ben took one of the color flyers with which the real estate agent had generously stocked a plastic display box mounted on the wrought-iron fence circling the yard. Ben and Lacy cuddled on the roof of a model car placed there as a toy for younger children. Wasserman crouched in the cold, near the end of the alley between Hess and Sixth until after four o'clock, watching Lacy and Benjamin tickle and touch each other. He heard Lacy squeal occasionally. He watched one push the other off the roof of the car when the other least expected it. He watch them deny and demand various affections from each other, watched their flirtation cycle through playful violence to agitated desire to complete stillness. The only perceptible movement, at times, was that of Lacy's fingers absently stroking the back of her Benjamin's neck.

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It went on like that for weeks. When they cut school, Reuben Wasserman roamed the city, following them. When they didn't cut school, he sat in the car all day on Niagra. The passenger seat of the car became a scaled-down version of his desk. On November 24, Lacy and Ben didn't cut school. Reuben Wasserman parked the car where he could see, through binoculars, the door near the teacher's parking lot. Most days when they didn't cut, they left school grounds around four or five p.m., even though the last class period ended at three. That Thursday they left the building at three after three. They went past the line of school busses and waited at the RTA bus stop at Salem and Wabash. Reuben Wasserman followed them to the corner of Emmet and Linwood. It was the first time he had been there, but he remembered the address. The children let themselves in. They stayed for twenty minutes. Reuben wondered if there was even anyone else there. After leaving the apartment, Lacy and Ben went to the cemetery. Reuben Wasserman followed them by car until they got to Waldo. At that point he continued driving south on Wayne. He parked in the Esther Price lot and climbed over the six-foot barbed wire fence that separated it from Woodland Cemetery. He couldn't see the kids. He hoped that meant they hadn't seen him. Reuben went south along the fence to the south end of the cemetery. He climbed the hills, cautiously approaching the central plateau. He stopped when he saw them at the pool. He crouched between the Ionic columns of the DEEDS

mausoleum. He was sixty yards from them. As far as he could see, the cemetery was empty except for the two children and him.

Through a series of unconscious movements, Wasserman settled into a comfortable kneel, his shoulder pressed to the side of the mausoleum. The columns hid him from the children. He kept his right hand in the side pocket of his coat to keep it warm. His left hand held the binoculars. From time to time he rested his left arm, letting it fall loose by his side and laying his head back, looking at the edge of the mausoleum roof, looking past it, through skeleton trees, to the gray sky. His breath condensed visibly as he exhaled. He thought about his own daughter. She could barely feed herself. She never left the house alone. She was constantly supervised at school. He reminded himself that fewer than one in nine missing persons are ever found after having been missing more than ninety-six hours. Maybe his expectations were too high. Maybe it was a mistake to be chasing these two around every time they cut school to make out with each other. He wondered whether Lacy was telling him the truth about seeing Sherman Brocious in the cemetery that Tuesday night. Was that her way of shifting responsibility for possession of that film away from herself? If Sherman hadn't given it to her, where had it come from? Had she taken those pictures herself? Certainly, a sixteen-year-old girl hadn't kidnapped and butchered five (or six?) boys. Could she know the person who had? Could she have known about it, maybe even been there, while an adult, someone she knew, did whatever was done to those boys? Did she know more about the cult than she let on? Could she have started the cult? Maybe Lacy Brothers had brainwashed five boys into mutilating and killing each other while she attended classes that first week of school. The attendance records showed she had been in school. Wasserman wasn't sure that he could trust them. What if Lacy had been telling the truth? What if Sherman Brocious was still alive somewhere?

Lacy and Benjamin were putting on their bags, walking in circles around the pool. Wasserman started to think about how best to follow them from where he was. He watched them through the binoculars, watched as Benjamin dug deep into the bag on Lacy's back and brought forth an indiscernible item. He tossed whatever it was into the pool. Then they left, traveling back in the direction of the gate on Waldo.

By then, Wasserman knew their roaming habits well enough that he thought he would be able to catch up with them in the car, even with some delay. Once they were out of sight over the first hill, he cautiously approached the pool. He kept an eye on the spot where they had gone out of sight. When he neared the pool, he saw that something was lying on the bottom. Blotches of the water's surface had already frozen. Wasserman looked around for a stick. There wasn't one long enough. He took off his coat, folded it twice, and plopped it down on the frozen ground. He thought briefly about his shoes, then he sat on the ledge and put each of his legs, one after the other, into the water. Thigh deep, he took two steps toward the center of the pool and bent down. His face went halfway underwater when he picked it up. The detective slushed toward the edge through the partially frozen water. He was soaked when he stepped out of the pool. He looked at the item in his hand. It was a transparent cylinder containing braided hair, a single frame of thirty-five millimeter film, a neatly-folded white paper, and several rocks. Wasserman thumbed off the cylinder's cap and dumped its contents into his hand. A segment of one of Merlin's braids, tied at each end with a rubber band. He held the film to the sky and squinted. It was either the same image he had in a folder on the passenger seat of the car, or one extremely similar, except this one was complete. It showed two pale left legs, bound at the ankles with barbed wire, lying on a bed of decomposing leaves. In this copy of the image Wasserman saw

that the legs had been completely severed from their bodies. The icy cold of the pool still clung to the detective. He shivered as he unfolded the white paper. It was ruled with blue lines. It was covered with tiny pigs, drawn in pink. Beyond the paper, Wasserman saw flecks of white falling on the surface of the pool. Soon the precipitation thickened, and the detective was standing by the pool, alone in the silence of Woodland Cemetery, blanketed by a cloud of the heavy flakes of the season's first snow.

It was a long walk back to the car.