

MERGELBURG

THE HEART OF VAN HELTEN



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Megrelburg: The Heart of
Van Helten [English Version]

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Аннотация

Mergelburg: The Heart of Van Helten — the first novel in a series about Howard van Helten, his coming of age, his choices, and the people who will leave their mark on his life.

Mergelburg, 1987. A small provincial town where shop windows light up in the evenings, diners hum with noise, and music drifts from passing cars. The young people live from weekend to weekend, but for Howard van Helten, everything changes in a single moment.

He sees through people, yet is afraid to reveal himself. Everything shifts when a girl enters his life — someone for whom he is ready, for the first time, to break his own rules. But the harder he tries to calculate every move, the faster the thing he fears losing slips away from him.

This is a story about how the fear of loss destroys more powerfully than loss itself.

But perhaps not everything has been decided yet.

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Megrelburg: The Heart of Van Helten [English Version]

PROLOGUE

**The more we try to control everything, the more
reality slips through our fingers**

Sigmund Freud

It is human nature to want to control everything around us—even that which cannot be controlled. We make plans, draw routes, arrange the future on neat shelves, as if life were a mechanism with understandable gears, where one only needs to twist a single part for everything to go as intended. But life is not a mechanism. It is a river—fast, murky, unpredictable—and any attempt to hold it in our palms always ends the same way: the water seeps through our fingers, leaving behind only a cold dampness and the bitter taste of helplessness.

This was precisely what Howard was thinking as he stood by the window on that raw autumn day. Beyond the glass, Mergelburg seemed like a town forgotten by time and weather alike. The gray facades of the houses, as if faded by endless rain, loomed over the narrow streets, while the wet cobblestones

reflected the dim glow of the streetlamps like shards of a broken mirror. The rain did not pour—it slid down the windows in slow, unhurried tears, blurring the outlines of the world into vague silhouettes. The air was heavy, saturated with the smell of dampness, cooling smoke, and something elusively sorrowful—as though the town itself was mourning something long gone.

The room breathed with an era its owners had no wish to chase away with modernity; on the contrary, they preserved it carefully. It was not a museum, nor was it an ordinary home: here, the style of the nineteenth century did not seem deliberate—it was a way of life. High ceilings with molding, heavy curtains of dark green velvet that muffled both street noise and light, and wooden furniture with fine carving, darkened in places by time but polished to a soft gleam—all of it created a sense of reliability, almost eternity. Dark oak bookshelves, filled with leather-bound volumes, covered nearly an entire wall; between them hung old engravings and yellowed maps, as if to remind one that the world was far larger than a single room or a single town. On a massive writing desk with bronze fittings lay an open atlas; beside it stood a copper inkwell and a quill, though no one had written with ink for a long time. In the corner, a grandfather clock ticked quietly; its steady rhythm was not intrusive but soothing, like the pulse of an old house.

The air carried not only the dampness from outside but also something homely: the wax used to polish the floors, old paper, and strong coffee. Howard wrapped his fingers around the hot

cup, but the warmth did not reach inside—the cold seemed to have settled somewhere deeper than the skin, in the very chest. He watched the drops slide down the glass and felt a familiar, almost habitual tension rising within him: the desire to fix everything, to foresee everything, to hold on to everything.

At seventeen, Howard looked as though he was trying to seem older and more serious than he really was. He wore a dark blue shirt made of thick fabric, its buttons carefully fastened all the way to the top—as if he wanted to hide his vulnerability within it. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and this single touch of carelessness betrayed his inner restlessness. His trousers, made of fine wool and dark gray in color, fit perfectly—recently bought, most likely at his father’s insistence. They felt too “grown-up” for a teenager, but Howard wanted to look like someone to be reckoned with. There was a tension in his posture, as if he were constantly ready for an argument or for defending his rightness.

“You’re making plans again,” came a quiet voice from behind him.

Howard did not turn around. He knew that voice, knew its intonation—there was no reproach in it, only a gentle, almost weary care.

Victor van Helten, Howard’s father, at nearly sixty looked like a man who had lived a long life without squandering either his intellect or his dignity. He held a doctorate in philology and was a professor, and there was an academic composure to him that never hardened into dryness. He wore an old tweed jacket, worn

in places but carefully mended—a garment he had kept for so many years that it seemed a part of him. Beneath it, a knitted dark brown vest was visible, and around his neck hung a thin wool scarf, draped carelessly yet tastefully. His gray hair was cropped short, and in the deep wrinkles around his eyes lingered a habit of smiling, even when the conversation turned to serious matters. In his hands he held a worn volume of Kant, as though he had been about to read, but had set it aside to talk.

His father stepped closer and stopped beside him, also staring into the rainy haze.

“Not plans,” Howard replied quietly, without taking his eyes off the window. “More like... insurance. If I think everything through, nothing bad will happen.”

His father gave a soft grunt—not mockingly, but with a touch of sad irony.

“Insurance against life?” He paused, watching the rain draw its incoherent patterns on the glass. “You know, when you were little, we used to float paper boats down the stream. Do you remember?”

Howard gave a barely noticeable nod.

“You folded them so carefully—every corner had to be even, every crease perfect. You thought that if the boat was made right, it wouldn’t sink. But then the current would catch it, spin it around, sometimes flip it over, and you would get angry. You wanted it to sail exactly where you had intended.”

“I wanted it not to break apart,” Howard corrected quietly.

“Yes,” his father agreed gently. “You wanted to protect it. But the river doesn’t listen to our wishes. And do you know what I told you then?”

Howard finally turned. His father’s face was calm, but in his eyes there was that particular wisdom that comes not from books, but from years lived—and from pain a man has learned to accept.

“That the current is not the truth,” Howard said almost in a whisper, as if tasting the words.

“Exactly,” his father nodded. “Going with the flow does not mean giving up. It means accepting that you cannot control the river. But not taking the current for truth—that is what matters. The current simply carries. It does not know where you need to go. It does not decide what is right for you.”

Howard looked out the window again. The rain was still sliding down the glass, and the town was still sinking into gray twilight, but now it seemed that there was not only sadness in it, but also a strange, harsh beauty—the beauty of untamed reality.

“Sometimes I feel that if I don’t control everything, everything will fall apart,” he admitted, and in those words there was no bravado, only a sincere, almost childlike anxiety.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder—light, yet firm, like an anchor in a storm.

“What is meant to fall apart will fall apart,” he said calmly. “But you will remain. And you will build again. Not because you calculated everything, but because you know how to rise. But don’t try to make the current your compass. It will carry you

somewhere you don't need to be.”

Howard took a deep breath, and with that breath, some of the tension that had been building for weeks seemed to leave his chest. He looked again at the rain, at the blurred lights, at the town living its own life without asking anyone's permission. And for the first time in a long while, he allowed himself not to try to hold on to everything.

Let the river flow. Let the paper boat sail wherever it wants. The main thing is not to confuse its path with your own truth.

Victor settled into a deep armchair that stood in the corner of the room opposite the window. With a quiet, familiar creak, the wood accepted his weight—the armchair was old but reliable, like everything in this house. He clicked the switch of a desk lamp with a yellow frosted shade, and the room immediately became smaller, cozier, as if it had narrowed the world down to a single warm circle of light. Shadows fell upon the carved patterns of the cabinets; the gilding on the spines of books flared softly for a moment and then dimmed.

Taking a pair of thin-framed glasses from their case, Victor put them on unhurriedly, adjusting the temple with a habitual movement. Then he opened the book—that same worn volume of Kant—and found the page where he had previously stopped. He paused for a second, as if listening not to the words, but to something behind them, to the silence between the lines. His fingers, slightly trembling with age but still steady, began to slowly stroke his short gray beard and mustache—an old habit

that betrayed deep concentration. He was lost in thought, though certainly not over the concept of the categorical imperative.

His blue eyes, once bright and now slightly faded from the years but still alive, lifted and came to rest on his son. There was so much in that gaze at once: fatherly care, weariness from trying to guess another's thoughts, and a quiet, stubborn desire to understand after all. One could read parental worry in them—not hysterical, not loud, but deep and patient, as if he were already taking upon himself part of the weight pressing down on Howard.

Victor closed the book carefully, without irritation, as if apologizing to it for the interrupted reading, and set it aside on a low carved table, where several pencil-written pages, a silver pen, and a small bronze owl figurine—a gift from Elizabeth on their anniversary—already lay.

He knew that thoughts of “control” did not arise from nothing. Howard had grown up in the family of philologist Victor and psychologist Elizabeth van Helten, and this had left a particular imprint on him. From childhood, he had not simply noticed emotions—he had read them like text, broken them down into meanings, compared intonations and glances, searched for subtext in every word. He felt the world more keenly than most of his peers, and this sensitivity was both a gift and a curse: it allowed him to see hidden motives, but it also made him vulnerable to any falseness.

That was why the elder van Helten understood: if he began

asking directly, it would not be a conversation but a psychological duel. Howard, raised on discussions about the mechanisms of consciousness and the nature of anxiety, parried any questions brilliantly. He knew how to defend himself with words, to build logical barricades, to hide pain behind flawless arguments. And if his father made a mistake in phrasing, the son would simply point it out politely, almost tenderly, and avoid answering.

His father was silent for another moment, as if sorting through not words but entire worlds in which those words had once lived. He knew: if he pushed too hard, Howard would immediately raise his defenses—politely, logically, flawlessly. An endless analysis was always running through his son's mind: every word from his father was broken down into possible meanings, every question into a dozen possible answers, every tone of voice into hidden intentions. For Howard, a conversation was not an exchange of thoughts but a chess match, in which he calculated his opponent's moves in advance.

But Victor decided to make a move his son's mind was most likely not prepared for. Not because he was cleverer, but because he was coming not from logic, but from silence and vulnerability. Such a turn either did not exist in Howard's calculations at all, or had been dismissed as improbable. And it was precisely this uncalculated scenario, accepted now by the teenager's consciousness, that could break through his armor.

Victor tilted his head slightly, as if listening not to his son, but to himself, and said quietly, almost to himself:

“You know, when I was about seventeen, I also thought that if you arranged everything correctly—the words, the pauses, the glances—you could make the world follow your script. I was sure: if only I found the right phrases, she would understand that I was the one.”

Howard flinched almost imperceptibly, but did not turn around. Only his fingers tightened around the cup, until his knuckles turned white.

“Her name was Marta,” Victor continued, not looking at his son, as if telling the story not to him, but to the rain outside the window. “I was living in a different town then, in a smaller house, without engravings and old books. And I thought love was a problem that could be solved if you didn’t make mistakes. I rehearsed phrases in front of the mirror, counted how many seconds to hold a pause so as not to seem pushy, and at the same time not let her forget about me. I thought that control was the same as caring.”

He paused briefly, remembering not so much Marta herself, but the desperation with which he had tried to hold on to a feeling that was slipping away.

“And then I understood something that at the time felt almost like a betrayal of my own efforts: you cannot force another person to feel what they don’t feel. And no perfect words will help. It was... hard. As if you were standing on a stage, saying everything exactly as written, and the hall was silent.”

The room grew quiet; only the grandfather clock steadily

counted the seconds, and the rain continued whispering something of its own against the glass.

“For a long time I couldn’t accept it,” Victor added quietly. “I thought the problem was with me: I had said something wrong, looked at the wrong moment, smiled the wrong way. And only years later did I realize that the mistakes weren’t the point. The point is that not all stories end the way we want them to. And not all feelings can be earned.”

Howard finally turned his head a little, though he still did not look directly at his father—his gaze slid over the dark wood of the cabinet, over the dim glint of bronze, over any point that was not Victor’s face. But in that half-turn there was already something new—not defense, but expectation.

“And what did you do then?” he asked almost in a whisper, as if afraid of frightening away this unfamiliar, honest tone of conversation.

“Nothing special,” Victor answered calmly. “I simply stopped trying to control everything. I allowed myself to be imperfect. And you know what the strangest thing is? When I stopped trying to be the person I thought I had to be for her, breathing became easier. Not because she suddenly fell in love with me, but because I stopped breaking myself for someone else’s silence.”

He tilted his head slightly, watching his son attentively, but without pressure.

“That doesn’t mean the pain disappears. It just stops being fuel for endless calculations. That’s what you’re doing right now,

isn't it? Running through every possible scenario in your head, searching for where you went wrong, what you could have said differently..."

Howard slowly lowered his gaze to his cup, as if searching the dark surface of the coffee for an answer he didn't dare speak aloud. His shoulders, tense until now, seemed to drop slightly—not from weakness, but because part of the weight had finally found something to rest on.

"Her name is Emily Moore," he said, and his voice sounded unusually brittle, as if the words were scraping his throat. "We sit two rows apart in class. Sometimes she laughs at someone's joke, and I catch myself trying to figure out: is it just laughter, or is she looking at someone, or... well, I don't know. She doesn't look at me. At all. As if I'm not there. And every day I try to think of a way to make her notice me."

He fell silent, as if frightened by what he had allowed himself to say.

"And every time I think that now I'm about to say the right thing, I immediately imagine how it could go wrong. Ten different versions, a hundred... I don't even manage to start, because I can already see everything falling apart."

Victor did not nod, did not rush to answer with comfort. He simply sat a little longer in the silence, allowing those words to take their place in the room, without trying to immediately correct or smooth them over.

"You know," he finally said quietly, "sometimes the bravest

thing you can do is not to calculate every possibility, but simply to say: ‘It matters to me that you’re here.’ Without a plan. Without strategy. Just the truth. Even if it changes nothing. Because you have the right to be heard, even if the answer isn’t the one you hoped for.”

Howard looked out the window again, where the rain was still blurring the lights of the town into dim smudges. But now there was something less hostile in that gray light—not a promise of happiness, but an acknowledgment that the world doesn’t have to be comfortable.

“But it’s easier to say nothing,” he said almost in a whisper.

“Yes,” Victor agreed calmly. “Easier. But not freer. And not more honest with yourself.”

And in that silence, filled with rain, old wood, and a heavy but necessary confession, something fragile and real finally settled between them—not a solution to the problem, but the right to have it. The right to feel, and not to hide it behind flawless calculations.

Howard said nothing more. Not out of distrust—he simply suddenly felt that the words that had seemed necessary a minute ago had become too heavy to speak. They seemed to catch on his ribs, unwilling to come out, and he decided to keep them to himself—let them lie where they were more at peace.

Victor understood. Not through any special insight, but by the way his son turned back to the window, by the way his fingers relaxed slightly on the cup, by the way there was no tension in the

silence—only the quiet weariness of someone who had finally allowed himself not to defend. The professor did not push, did not search for new detours to the truth. He simply remained seated in his armchair, in the warm circle of light from the yellow lamp, and let that silence become something reliable—not an emptiness, but a space where one could breathe.

The rain outside gradually weakened. It no longer lashed against the windows, but rustled softly, as if the town itself had finally exhaled and decided to quiet down a little. The drops slid more slowly, as if in no hurry, and there was something soothing in that unhurried pace. The lights of Mergelburg, previously blurred and dim, now stood out more clearly, reflected in the wet asphalt like timid sparks of hope.

Victor took off his glasses, placed them on the table beside the book, and closed his eyes for a second, as if giving himself permission to share in that silence.

Howard stood by the window, and his reflection in the glass seemed a little less sharp, less tense. He wasn't looking at his father, but he felt his presence—not as pressure, but as a support that asked for nothing in return. And in that, too, there was a form of trust: not to pour everything out at once, but simply to let someone know that things were hard, without demanding to be “fixed” on the spot.

“If you ever want to tell me more,” Victor said quietly, almost in a whisper, without opening his eyes, “I’ll be here. And if you don’t want to, I’ll still be here.”

Howard gave a barely perceptible nod, without turning around. That was enough.

Outside, the town was slowly waking from the rain. The sky had lightened a little, and the gray shroud was beginning to break into separate layers—paler, almost pearlescent. Far away, a car passed, and its headlights cut through the damp twilight for a moment, leaving behind only a brief trail of light.

And when that light faded, Howard finally stepped away from the window. He set his cup on the windowsill, ran his palm across the cold glass as if wiping away the last drops, and quietly sat down on the edge of the sofa—not too close to his father, but not at the other end of the room either. Just nearby.

They sat like that for a while—in a silence that didn't need to be filled with anything. Then Victor picked up the book, opened it to that same page as if returning to something long familiar, and began to read aloud—quietly, steadily, the way one reads when the goal is not so much to tell a story as to build a protective circle around it. And Howard listened, not so much to every word as to the rhythm of his father's voice—even, calm, as if promising: whatever happens tomorrow, today, here, all is well.

CHAPTER 1

**Do not seek to have everything happen as you wish,
but wish for everything to happen as it actually does,
and your life will be serene.**

Epictetus

The Mergelburg morning showed no signs of softening. The wind still drove dry leaves along the sidewalks, flung prickly sprays of yesterday's rain into passersby's faces, and seemed determined to make every step heavier. Autumn had finally settled in, and the town appeared even grayer than before, yet there was none of the dull hopelessness that had weighed down the previous day. It was simply autumn—harsh, frank, and disinclined toward comfort. Howard pulled his coat tighter, feeling the fabric catch on his shoulders as though trying to hold him in place. In his pocket, he felt a small folded piece of paper—on it, the day before, he had jotted down a few phrases he wanted to say to Emily. Now it felt less like support and more like a burden: the closer Howard came to school, the louder a voice in his head insisted that all those phrases were foolish, ridiculous, clumsy, and destined to end with him face-first in the mud.

Passersby hurried past, wrapping themselves in scarves and

hiding their faces from the wind. Some rushed, others wandered slowly, as if unsure of their destination. The town lived its ordinary life—indifferent and yet strangely caring: it promised no miracles, but allowed each person to go their own way.

At the school gates, Howard stopped for a second, drawing in the cold air deeply, as if gathering courage not for some great feat, but for a simple, human step. When he walked into the yard, where students were already crowding, the laughter and shouts sounded not like mockery, but like the ordinary noise of life—chaotic, alive, and impossible to calculate. Amid that bustle, a little apart from a noisy group of seniors, stood Emily. Alone. For a second, the whole world seemed to shrink to that point—to her silhouette, to the way the wind tried to tousle her hair, but it, thick and wavy, just past her shoulders, stubbornly fell in soft waves, as if it knew it was meant to be exactly that.

She was a brunette whose hair, in the dim morning light, seemed not merely dark—dozens of shades hid within it, from deep chocolate to almost black, with thin silver threads where the wind caught it. Her blue eyes, bright as shards of winter sky, looked somewhere forward, as if she were trying to discern something of her own in the gray day, something only she understood. Her athletic, toned figure was not deliberate but natural—as if she were simply used to being in motion, used to the fact that her body was an instrument, not a display. Her hands were lovely, with a neat manicure, not a single extraneous detail—but there was no coldness in that; on the contrary, that

composure made her vivid, real.

In Howard's eyes, she looked not like an unreachable statue, but like a person in whom everything was gathered at once: strength and vulnerability, confidence and a slight confusion that she immediately hid, as if ashamed of it. He looked at her and suddenly understood that he did not want to calculate possibilities. Did not want to think about how she might answer, how she would look, what she would do. He simply wanted to see her like that—real, without the filters of anxiety.

“Now,” he thought, squeezing the edge of his pocket where the paper lay. “Now I’ll go over. I’ll ask how her morning started. I’ll ask about the graduation project. Anything. Just to hear her voice.”

But before he could take a step, Tyler appeared beside him.

“Howard! Hey, where are you rushing off to?” Tyler clapped him on the shoulder, a little too energetically, as he always did when he wanted to share something urgent. “Are you even aware of what happened yesterday?”

Howard flinched, surfacing from his trance. Tyler was about the same height as he was—around one hundred and seventy centimeters—of average build, with neatly styled chestnut hair: his bangs fell to the right side, while on the left there was a perfect part, as if he had spent half an hour in front of the mirror trying to achieve that careless precision. In his eyes burned the same excitement with which he collected school gossip the way others collected stamps.

“Well, picture it,” Tyler went on, not waiting for an answer. “Chris and Jake went yesterday to that old warehouse behind the park—you know the one everyone avoids. Rumor says someone holds underground bicycle races there, but it’s not certain. Anyway, they decided it was their chance to become ‘those guys.’ They climbed in, and there was a security guard—not just any, but supposedly an ex-military man. Chris, of course, immediately started babbling something about ‘we were just looking,’ and Jake tried to act like he’d wandered in by accident and had just been passing by on his way to buy bread. The guard looked at them like he saw right through them and said, ‘If you’re just looking, why do you have flashlights in your hands and gloves like burglars?’ In the end, he made them clean up trash around the warehouse until midnight. And today everyone at school already knows, and Chris is telling everyone it was a ‘voluntary community initiative.’”

Tyler burst out laughing, clearly savoring every detail of the story, and waited for Howard to smile too, to pick up the joke and join in their usual back-and-forth. And Howard did smile—but the smile came out strained, like a badly sewn button. He nodded in the right places, inserted “come on” and “no way,” but his gaze kept slipping back to Emily, who was still standing alone, as if the world around her had paused for a second.

“And in the end, you know what he said?” Tyler leaned forward, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “The guard threw at them on their way out: ‘Next time you come back,

at least come up with a decent cover story. “We were just going for bread” isn’t even funny anymore.”

Howard wanted to laugh, wanted to say something witty like before, but the words stuck somewhere between his throat and his tongue. Instead, he suddenly felt how tightly he was squeezing the handle of his bag, as if it were an anchor keeping him from simply turning around and walking over to Emily.

“Listen,” he exhaled, trying to keep his voice calm and unhurried, without resentment toward himself for once again postponing an important step. “Sorry, I really have to go. I’m... a little out of it right now. But I’ll gladly hear the rest later, honestly.”

Tyler paused for a second, as if not quite understanding why his story had not gotten the expected reaction. Then he nodded, frowning slightly, but immediately relaxed again—he had a talent for not staying offended for long.

“Fine. But don’t think you’re getting out of it. After class you’ll tell me where you were rushing off to.” He winked, waved, and melted into the crowd, carrying with him part of the usual noise that always swirled around him.

As soon as Tyler disappeared from view, Howard turned back to the spot where Emily had been standing. But now she was no longer alone. A small group of friends had gathered around her: someone was telling a story, waving their hands, someone was laughing, and she herself had tilted her head slightly, that same smile playing on her lips—light, sincere, as if she really

was enjoying the chatter, the little things, the ordinary school moments.

For a moment Howard froze. He took a couple of steps forward, almost without realizing it, and simply looked at her—at the way the light fell on her hair, at the sparks of laughter in her blue eyes, at how she moved as if unaware of her own beauty, as if it were simply part of her, as natural as breathing. And in that moment he suddenly understood: she was beautiful not because she was perfect, but because she was real. There was nothing invented about her, nothing calculated—only life, loud and bright, refusing to obey any scripts.

He held that image inside for another second, letting it warm him from within, then slowly turned left, gripping the handle of his bag more tightly. With his other hand he mechanically adjusted his coat, as if that gesture could give him back even a little composure. And he walked on—not toward her, not now, but not away from her either. Just farther, to where the day was already waiting for him with all its unexpected turns that defied any calculation.

A couple of lessons passed almost unnoticed—as if Howard had been present in the classroom only in body, while his thoughts wandered somewhere far away. In geometry, the teacher drew angles and triangles on the board, wrote out formulas, but to Howard these were not figures but diagrams: he was mentally constructing the ideal trajectory by which he might approach Emily, calculating the points where their routes

crossed in the hallways, picking out moments when she was alone. Every line became a step toward a conversation, every angle a possible obstacle to get around. In geography, it was even further from reality. The teacher talked about climates, capitals, and mountain ranges, while the lovesick boy saw not maps and atlases but his and Emily's travels. There they were, walking along the narrow cobblestone streets of old Brussels—between houses with pointed roofs, where the wind carried the smell of fresh pastries from a little bakery on the corner; there they stood on the shore of the Mediterranean by the cliffs of Amalfi, and the salty wind mixed her wavy hair with the sun's sparkles on the water; there they were riding a train through the green hills of Tuscany, with rows of cypresses and vineyards bathed in golden light drifting past the window. Every country turned into the place of their future vacation, every river into a road they might walk along together. He caught himself mechanically writing down the names of cities—Brussels, Naples, Florence—as if composing an itinerary, then immediately erased them, feeling the absurdity of those fantasies.

During the long break, Howard sat down at a table in the school cafeteria—at the very one by the window, from which part of the schoolyard was visible. He was served the usual late-80s school lunch: a plate of mashed potatoes with a golden-breaded cutlet on top, a few slices of pickled cucumber and a piece of dark bread beside it. In the mug was warm cocoa—not too sweet, with a light foam on top. Howard ate almost mechanically, not

tasting anything, and from time to time stirred the cocoa with his spoon, as if hoping to find some answer in the dark liquid.

The cafeteria hummed with its usual sounds: the clatter of dishes, fragments of conversations, someone's laughter, the scraping of chairs. But to Howard that noise seemed distant, fading into a background against which his own thoughts rang louder. He looked out the window, where streams from the morning rain ran along the asphalt, and again went over the phrases from that little paper in his head, trying to find an intonation that would not make them sound laughable or pitiful.

At some point he felt someone's gaze on him—warm, persistent, but not heavy. Raising his eyes, he saw Susan. She had quietly sat down across from him, resting her hands on the edge of the table, and was looking at him with her big green eyes—attentively, patiently, as if she were ready to sit like that through the whole break until he finally noticed her.

Susan was small, delicate, with soft features and a wayward strand of light hair that always escaped from her braid. There was not a drop of that tense composure that lived in Howard—she seemed lighter, as if she knew how not to cling to worries but to let them drift past. But beneath that outward lightness she was incredibly perceptive: she noticed everything—how her brother squeezed his fingers, how he averted his gaze, how he stirred his cocoa not in circles but with sharp, nervous movements. To her, those little things were like words, only more honest.

“You’re thinking about something again that you’re not telling

anyone,” she said quietly, tilting her head slightly, as if listening not to words but to what was hidden behind them. “I can tell. You’re sitting like you’re holding the whole world on your shoulders, and it doesn’t fit you.”

Howard smiled weakly—not because things had gotten easier, but because next to Susan even heaviness felt a little less prickly.

“It’s just one of those days,” he tried to wave it off, but his voice betrayed him: there was no confidence in it, only weariness.

“A day like any other,” Susan replied calmly, not arguing, just calling things by their names. “But you’re different in it. Not like when you’re just angry or tired. You seem afraid to take a step, and then afraid you won’t take it.”

She paused, then carefully pushed a saucer with a small shortbread cookie—his favorite—toward him.

“If you don’t want to talk, you don’t have to. I’ll just sit here. Or we can talk about anything: about classes, about Tyler’s dumb gossip, about how weird the cocoa is today. Or about nothing at all. But if you ever want someone to just listen... I’m here. And I won’t say ‘come on’ or ‘it’s not that bad.’ I’ll just listen.”

There was no pressure in her words, only a quiet, reliable kindness—the kind that asks nothing in return and therefore works more powerfully than any persuasion.

Howard looked at his sister, at her attentive green eyes, at that cookie, as if she were trying to support her words with something tangible, and suddenly felt something inside him loosen just a little, shedding some of the tension.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and that “thank you” was not for the cookie but for the fact that she hadn’t tried to poke at the most painful place, but had simply reached out her hand into the darkness.

He took the cookie, bit off a piece, and this time the taste suddenly became real—sweet, crumbly, simple. And for one short second all that endless calculation of possibilities, all those routes and scenarios, all the attempts to think through everything and miss nothing—all of it receded, leaving room for something small but real: his sister, the cookie, a quiet conversation that didn’t have to lead anywhere.

Susan really had managed to pull Howard out of the whirlpool of his thoughts for a minute—so deftly, as if she had simply turned off the noise. He suddenly noticed how the cafeteria smelled: not only of food, but also of old wood, chalk from the classrooms, a little dusty and homely. He heard someone at the next table giggle, a spoon clink, a chair scrape. And for that one minute he felt lighter—as if the heaviness he had been carrying since morning had become a little lighter, not gone, but at least no longer pressing on his shoulders.

He looked at Susan and thought that in her attentive green eyes there was no judgment, no desire to “fix” him, not even the kind of curiosity that wounds. Only a quiet “I’m here.” And that made him calm. He treasured that sincerity of hers immensely—it was the very support that doesn’t boast of its reliability, but simply stands beside you, even when everything is falling apart.

Howard wanted to tell her everything: about Emily, about the paper in his pocket, about how he rehearsed every phrase ten times and still feared he would say the wrong thing. But he held back. He understood that she couldn't give him the answer to the questions gnawing at him from inside. He didn't want to shift that confusion onto her, didn't want his anxiety to become her anxiety too. Let at least one person have a simple day.

But he did want to talk to her. Just to hear her voice, to feel that the world wasn't made only of endless calculations.

"I see Tyler managed to fill you in on the Chris and Jake story," he said with a smile, trying to make the smile not forced but real.

Susan snorted, rolling her eyes, and there was so much sisterly irony in that gesture that Howard couldn't help smiling wider.

"He told me about it during the break between first and second period. And he made it sound like the news of the century. I even tried to pretend I was listening, but at some point I realized that if I heard the words 'underground races' one more time, I'd fall asleep right at my desk."

"I couldn't even properly pretend to be interested," Howard admitted, lowering his voice a little. "I kept trying to look past him, over to where... Ahem." He glanced aside, as if trying to instantly veer away from what he'd been about to say. "Where Harry was standing."

Susan noticed that maneuver: her brother clearly didn't want to say where exactly he had been looking, and it definitely wasn't

about Harry O'Neil. She simply nodded, as if understanding without words: "Yes, sometimes other people's fun sounds like white noise when something of your own is humming inside."

They went on discussing that absurd story for a little while—not seriously, just to keep talking, to avoid leaving a silence that could again give way to anxious thoughts. Susan comically imitated Tyler's intonation when he whispered about "come up with a decent cover story," and Howard laughed—sincerely, without effort, for the first time that day.

And in that moment he noticed how she suddenly froze, then changed her tone slightly—it became quieter, softer, as if she was trying to sound normal but couldn't. Susan averted her gaze, and just then, past their table, a boy walked by. Howard saw him only from behind, but that was enough to sense the confidence in his stride: he walked as if he knew exactly where he was going and why, as if the whole world was not a labyrinth to him but a straight road. Shoulders squared, step sure, not a trace of haste.

In that same second, Susan's fingers began nervously twisting around each other; her nails caught faintly, as if searching for something to hold on to. She seemed to be trying to hide that tremor, to pretend everything was fine, but to Howard, who was used to noticing details, it was like a scream, only very quiet.

A couple of seconds later, she looked back at her brother, as if returning from another world, and hastily broke the awkward pause:

"So... where were we? On how Tyler talks too much? Or on

how Chris and Jake are the unluckiest people on earth?”

Howard smirked slightly, but didn't press with questions. He didn't want her to feel caught. Instead, he played along gently:

“I think we were on how Tyler is the best storyteller in the world—if you don't listen to the content, only to the intonation.”

Susan exhaled—Howard noticed it by the way her shoulders relaxed a little—and smiled graciously, as if he had just quietly offered her a hand and kept her from falling.

The next second, Vanessa—Susan's classmate—slid into the seat at their table. She burst into their quiet corner as if she had brought a piece of sunshine with her: bright, energetic, with that smile that seemed to promise the day couldn't be all bad. She wore a plaid skirt, a turtleneck sweater, and a bright scarf that seemed to live a life of its own—it kept slipping, and she kept adjusting it, laughing at her own clumsiness.

“Hey there, my dears!” Vanessa exclaimed, flopping onto the bench as if they were not in the school cafeteria but at a picnic in the park. “You look so serious, like you're discussing the fate of the universe instead of school lunch. What's going on? Or better yet, tell me what's been going on without me? I feel like I missed something important!”

Her voice was bright and infectious; there wasn't an ounce of falseness in it—only a sincere desire to be part of everything happening. She immediately reached for Howard's mug, pretended she was about to take a sip, then snatched her hand back with a giggle:

“Just kidding! Your cocoa is sacred. But if you have another cookie, I’m ready to sell my soul for it. Or at least tell you the latest gossip—your choice.”

She snapped her fingers as if trying to catch a thought, then blurted out:

“By the way, did you hear? There’s a rehearsal for the Christmas concert in the assembly hall on Friday, and Mr. Harris wants the seniors to help with the decorations. I already signed up. If you come with me, it won’t be so scary hauling those boxes. Or at least you can cheer me on.”

Vanessa talked fast, but not annoyingly—more as if she was afraid that if she stopped, all that charge of energy would simply scatter. And, most surprisingly, she really did change the atmosphere: with her arrival, the silence became fragile and the tension heavy. Now it was just a pause between lines, not an abyss one could fall into.

Susan laughed, shaking her head, but there was relief in her laughter—as if she too was glad they no longer had to hold the conversation just the two of them, that she could hide a little behind that cheerful chatter.

“Vanessa, you’re like a hurricane,” she said, smiling. “In a good way.”

“A hurricane with cookies and good intentions,” Vanessa winked, then turned to Howard as if only now truly noticing him. “And why are you so quiet? Don’t worry, I don’t bite. It’s just that when I’m quiet, I feel like the world stops, and I don’t like that.”

Howard caught himself smiling—and this time it wasn't an attempt to seem normal. It came on its own, as if in response to that lively, loud sincerity.

The bell rang sharply, as if cutting the conversation off mid-sentence. Vanessa flinched, immediately jumped up, grabbed Susan by the arm, and pulled her along, chattering as she went:

“Okay, okay, let's run, or else Mrs. Clark will again say I'm ‘disrupting discipline with my lateness,’ when really it's her disrupting my peace of mind with her looks! Are you coming? Or are you going to pretend you're an angel who's never late?”

Susan, already rising, only managed to brush her hand across Howard's shoulder—a light, almost weightless touch that held all her “I wish I could stay just one more minute.” She smiled at him quickly, guiltily, as if apologizing for the world's hurry, and then vanished into the stream of students, carried away by Vanessa's energetic whirlwind.

Everything around started moving: chairs scraped against the floor, someone dropped a notebook, someone called a friend across the hall, someone laughed without hearing their own voice in the noise. The hallways were already beginning to fill with the rumble of footsteps, and the cafeteria, which a minute before had seemed like an island of quiet, turned into a crossroads of hurrying lives—each person rushing to their own class, their own little drama, their own way of not drowning in the day.

Howard unhurriedly folded his napkin, wiped his mouth, stacked his dishes on the tray, and went to the washing station.

On the way, he paused for a second, breathing in that particular cafeteria smell—warm bread, boiled potatoes, and a hint of sharp soap—as if he wanted to hold on to that moment of calm before plunging back into the school whirlpool.

By the sink stood Clara—a plump woman with kind, slightly tired eyes and hands roughened by hot water and brushes. She always smiled as if that smile was her personal way of keeping herself from drowning in routine. Beside her bustled her young helper Lina, who had only been working for two months and still fussed about as if afraid of doing something wrong.

“Well, here you are, Howard,” Clara said, nodding almost imperceptibly, and in her voice there was neither reproach nor hurry—only the usual warm recognition of his presence. “As always, you bring everything yourself. Not like some: they leave their trays as if we’re not people but the janitors of their personal messes.” She turned toward Lina and went on. “I remember when he first came. Eleven years ago... such a little boy, big brown eyes, blinking as if the whole world scared him, yet trying to stand straight as if he wasn’t afraid. He’d bring his tray in his little hands, thank me so warmly as if I’d saved his life. I thought then: see, there are children who understand that politeness isn’t about ‘you’re supposed to,’ but about ‘I see you.’”

Lina smiled, tilting her head slightly, and answered quietly: “It’s nice to see that. In all this hustle... it’s like a little ray of light.”

Howard stood with his gaze lowered a little, and a modest

smile played on his lips—not from pride, but rather from the awkward warmth spreading somewhere beneath his ribs. It was pleasant to hear, but he didn't want to be made into a hero. To him, it was simply the right thing: not to leave a mess behind, not to walk past those who make your life a little easier every day.

He stepped closer and, setting his tray on the counter, said quietly but firmly:

“Thank you. For doing all this every day. For the lunches, for the cleanliness, for the fact that even when everyone is rushing and making noise, it still feels... human here. I appreciate it. Really.”

Clara froze for a second—as if those words had fallen right into her palms and she didn't know where to put them so they wouldn't drop. Then she nodded slowly, and something flickered in her eyes—the kind of thing that appears when someone finally notices not only your work, but you yourself.

“Thank you, Howard,” she said quietly, squeezing the cloth in her hand a little, as if that familiar thing had suddenly become an anchor for her. “Sometimes just hearing that... it's like a cup of hot tea on a cold day. It warms you.”

Lina also smiled, blushed slightly, and murmured:

“Yes... thank you. That's nice.”

Howard nodded once more, as if wanting to set those words in place, to make them real, then turned toward the cafeteria exit. At the doorway he paused for a second, as if wanting to add something else, but couldn't find the right words—and

just smiled faintly once more toward the sink, where Clara was already getting back to work, but now there was a little more lightness in her movements, and in her voice, as she said something quietly to Lina, there was a quiet gratitude.

“Everyone has their own river,” he thought as he walked down the hall toward the art room. “And each one has its own current, its own rapids, its own quiet backwaters where one can hide for a little while. And no one knows how much strength it takes just to stay afloat.”

He walked on, and those thoughts did not weigh him down but rather supported him, like a railing on a steep staircase. He knew that every person wakes up in the morning carrying some burden—someone is afraid of a test, someone of a conversation, someone simply afraid that the day will again be gray and empty. And almost everyone thinks their own problems are the heaviest, while other people’s are trifles, because those are invisible. But he, like Susan, tried to notice that invisible heaviness. Tried not to pass by, not to pretend he didn’t see.

His mother’s words, spoken one evening when he had complained that people around were “not what they should be,” always came back to him:

“It doesn’t matter whether you know a person personally or it’s just some stranger. Be polite and kind. You can never know what a person went through this morning or last evening, what thoughts are tormenting their mind, what makes them barely hold back from dropping their hands and crying. Sometimes one kind

word is a lifeline you throw without even knowing that someone is drowning.”

And he tried to throw those lifelines. Not for praise, not to seem good, but because he believed: if you see that someone is struggling, the least you can do is not add to their burden.

The door to the art room was ajar, and no familiar noise came from inside—no arguments about paints, no laughter, no rustling of paper. Howard paused, as if listening to that strange silence, then stepped inside. There was no one in the room except the elderly teacher—Mr. Finch. He was short, with gray hair heavily silvered at the temples and a large bald spot that made his forehead seem especially high, almost wise. The deep wrinkles on his face formed a complex pattern: they softened when he smiled and sharpened when his gaze turned stern. Mr. Finch’s brown eyes could be both warm and piercing—as if he were simultaneously understanding you and testing whether you deserved that understanding.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Finch,” Howard greeted quietly, feeling that in this unusual silence his voice sounded a little louder than he would have liked.

Mr. Finch looked up from a stack of sketches, raised his eyebrows slightly, as if surprised that someone had actually come, and nodded:

“Hello, Howard. Glad to see at least one boy who hasn’t traded his paints for the stage.”

Howard frowned a little, not understanding:

“Where is everyone?”

“Mr. Harris excused everyone who wanted to help prepare for the Christmas concert. And, imagine, there were so many volunteers that the hall is packed now. So the art room is practically a private temple today. For the chosen ones. Or for those who simply didn’t want to carry boxes.”

He said it without judgment, more with light irony, and Howard suddenly felt something like gratitude stir inside: Mr. Finch neither made a hero of his presence nor considered him strange.

The room was arranged unusually: it was divided into separate “corners,” separated from one another by shelves filled with the best student works from all eighty-nine years of the school’s history. There were plaster heads, vases, old still lifes, darkened with age but still proud of their place in history. That layout had been designed on purpose: so that students wouldn’t distract each other, so that each could remain alone with their canvas and their thoughts.

Howard went to his spot—section number two. Everything here was familiar: an easel with an unfinished landscape still on it from the last lesson, a box of brushes, jars of paint lightly covered with dust, as if even they knew that inspiration didn’t come every day. He carefully arranged everything, set up the canvas, ran his fingers over its rough surface—and paused for a moment, listening to himself.

Mr. Finch watched him from his place by the window. Then

he said quietly:

“You know, I don’t like it when students come here just because they have nowhere else to go. It’s much more unpleasant for me to watch them waste paint, drawing something without any desire to create, than to see them absent. In eleventh grade, there really are more important things. But you... you seem to come not out of desperation. You come to talk to the canvas.”

Howard shrugged slightly, not knowing how to respond to such precise words.

“It’s just... it’s calmer for me here.”

Mr. Finch tilted his head a little, as if trying on that phrase the way one tries on a hat—to see whether it suits.

“Calmer. Yes. But look at your work.”

He came closer, not invading Howard’s personal space, but rather standing beside him, as an equal. He looked for a long time at the canvas, where gray tones flowed into one another, forming a city that didn’t exist on any map: foggy streets, empty benches, streetlamps whose light seemed unable to dispel the darkness.

“It’s gray. Not simply restrained—truly gray. And this isn’t your first painting in that vein. Tell me, do you see the world that way? Or are you just afraid to add color, because then you’d have to believe it exists?”

Howard involuntarily squeezed the brush. He wanted to argue, to say it was just style, that he was searching for a mood, but the words stuck halfway between his throat and the truth.

“The world isn’t so bad,” Mr. Finch said softly, as if not

arguing but offering Howard a chance to taste that thought.

“Not so bad...” Howard hesitated for a second, then added firmly: “But not as good as one wants to think either. Sometimes it seems the good is just rare breaks in the clouds. They exist, but they’re few and they disappear quickly.”

Mr. Finch didn’t argue; he only tilted his head slightly:

“That means you notice them. Those breaks. That’s already something. Some people don’t even see the sky while walking in the rain.”

“I see them,” Howard admitted. “But it doesn’t make things easier. Because you know they won’t last. And then it’ll be gray again.”

“Maybe that’s the point? Not to wait for the clouds to leave, but to learn to notice the light while it’s there. Even if it’s weak. Even if it’s barely visible.”

“But is that honest?” There was a weariness in Howard’s voice he couldn’t hide. “To pretend everything is fine when it isn’t?”

“No one is asking you to pretend. I’m only asking you not to let the darkness block the whole horizon. Color doesn’t have to be bright to be real. Sometimes a single thin line, a single barely noticeable shade is enough to make the whole canvas suddenly lighter. You don’t have to paint over the darkness. You just have to let it know that there is light nearby. Even if it’s quiet.”

Howard was silent for a moment, looking at his gray painting as if seeing it whole for the first time.

“What if I don’t know how to find it?” he asked quietly.

“You already do. Otherwise you wouldn’t notice that everything around is gray. To see a shadow means to know that somewhere there is light. You’re just not looking in the right place yet.”

Howard looked at his canvas—and suddenly seemed to step inside that gray painting, walking through its streets, where anxiety and fear hung in the air like thick fog. The shutters on the houses were tightly closed, as if the inhabitants were afraid to let into their homes not only the cold but also a stranger’s gaze, a stranger’s word, a stranger’s hope. It seemed the houses hid behind those shutters their own small but heavy truth.

Mr. Finch, standing a little way off, glanced at the thoughtful young man—and his gaze softened; that particular sympathy surfaced in it, the kind that doesn’t shout but whispers: “I see how hard it is for you.” He wanted to pat Howard comfortingly on the shoulder, to say something simple and strong: “You’ll manage. You’ll find your colors yet.” He even half-raised his hand, but then lowered it and hid it behind his back, as if deciding that words or gestures would be too loud for that silence. Turning, he quietly returned to his desk, leaving Howard alone with his canvas and his thoughts.

Howard wanted to add brightness to the painting, but he didn’t know how to do it so that everything would turn out perfectly. It seemed to him that if he made a mistake with a shade, if the line came out too sharp or, on the contrary, too timid, the fragile balance of his world would break. And looking at that city, which

had become a mirror of his soul, he suddenly thought: a person's life is the same kind of easel. Every day a new stroke lands on it: someone's glance, a chance word, a memory, hope, fear. Some people paint with bright, bold colors, unafraid of smudges and stains. Some carefully lay down barely visible lines, as if afraid of taking up too much space. And some, like him right now, see everything in shades of gray and don't dare step beyond those boundaries.

At that moment, a woman's voice came from the half-open door—quiet but insistent:

“Mr. Finch, they're asking for you in the teachers' lounge. It's urgent.”

Finch froze for a second, as if wanting to say something else, but only gave a short nod, cast a warm, understanding look at Howard, and hurried out, pulling the door shut behind him. His absence did not make the room empty—on the contrary, it seemed to give Howard space to breathe a little more freely, to focus not only on drawing but also on his thoughts.

And he began to think—this time about the very philosophy of life. Looking at his gray city, he asked himself: if his world was so muted now, then for someone else it was probably too bright. How did that person feel? With what thought did they wake up in the mornings? Did they notice all the little things Howard was used to noticing in every person and every new day? Or, on the contrary, were they so surrounded by light that they couldn't see shadows and therefore didn't understand what it was like to stand

in the half-dark and try to make out at least one warm glimmer?

Time passed unnoticed. The hour and a half of class was drawing to a close, and Howard was still standing in front of his easel, as if afraid to move lest he frighten those thoughts away. His easel stood by the window, and from time to time he glanced at the sky, where gray, almost black autumn clouds raced one after another, as if hurrying somewhere, carrying cold and dampness with them. He seemed to draw the mood for his city from them—from their heaviness, from their silent weariness.

But then that unbroken stream began to break apart. Narrow gaps appeared between the clouds, and the sun cautiously peeked out from behind them. Its light was not bright or blinding—rather timid, as if it wasn't sure whether it should show itself on such a gloomy day. But it was there. And it warmed a little.

Feeling that touch of sun, Howard glanced at the clock—and only then truly realized that the time for his gray city had indeed come to an end. He began putting away the paints, carefully washing the brushes, trying not to damage the bristles, rinsing the palette until the water no longer carried the mixture of colors, and placing all his supplies into the signed shelf in the cabinet—"H. Van Helten." The letters had been written in his own hand at the beginning of the year, and now that neat label seemed to confirm: this is my place, my corner, my right to be here, even if I'm not like everyone else.

While he was fussing, awkwardly adjusting his shirt after removing his slightly stained apron, a soft, sweet female voice

came from behind him:

“Your painting is darker than it seemed.”

The voice seemed to be trying not to startle, but it still rang out sharply, like a sudden chord in the silence. Startled, Howard dropped the cup of solvent and an empty paint jar. They thudded dully on the floor but didn't break—as if even the world had decided to spare him today.

Emily stood in a patch of sunlight that streamed through the window and lay on the floor in warm rectangles. She was squinting adorably—the sun was shining right into her eyes, and she had tilted her head slightly, as if trying to see him through that golden curtain. The sunbeams seemed to play in her hair, weaving thin golden threads from the dark brown waves. A light strand had come loose and fallen softly onto her cheek—and Howard suddenly wanted to reach out and tuck it behind her ear, but he only gripped his fingers tighter, holding himself in place. There was no harsh, cold beauty in her features—everything was alive: a small, slightly upturned nose, a line of lips that first curved into a guilty smile, then became serious when she looked at the painting. In both hands, lowered in front of her, she held her schoolbag—not like a burden, but like a shield, a familiar support that helped her stay confident even in the most awkward situations. She noticed his fright—and couldn't hold back a slight smile. Not mocking, but warm, almost guilty: she found it amusing that she had startled him so much, and awkward at the same time.

He froze, blushing, feeling everything inside him clench with embarrassment.

Emily took a couple of steps forward, about to bend down and help gather the supplies, but Howard stopped her, saying:

“No, no, don’t bother, I’ll do it myself!”—almost pushing the air between them, as if he wanted to keep her at a safe distance so he wouldn’t make even more of a fool of himself.

She stopped and apologized again:

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to... Sorry I startled you.”

And he, already hastily picking up the fallen things, suddenly blurted out, not knowing where the words came from:

“Oh, come on, how could such a joy scare anyone? I just wasn’t expecting...”

And immediately groaned inside: “Idiot, be more confident! Why did you say that? What will she think? Say something normal!” He was smiling at her, looking at her as if she were not an ordinary girl but some miracle that had descended right into that dusty classroom, and her smile was literally melting all his tension, driving away his usual doubts.

“You know, I’ve been drawing in section three this whole time,” Emily admitted quietly, lowering her gaze a little, as if she too felt a bit awkward. “And... I accidentally overheard your conversation with Mr. Finch. Not on purpose, it’s just... the acoustics in there, voices carry.”

In that moment, something clicked in Howard’s head: “Damn, she was practically right next to me the whole time!” He suddenly

felt hot not from embarrassment, but from the realization that all his thoughts, all his words, even the silence between phrases—she had heard it all. And she hadn't left. She had stayed. And now she stood here, looking at him without judgment, but rather with interest—as if he were a puzzle she wanted to solve.

“I got curious about which painting you were talking about,” she continued, tilting her head slightly, and in her voice there was no idle curiosity, but a real, quiet desire to understand. “I spent the whole class picturing that colorless landscape in my head and asking myself: is it really so gray that even Mr. Finch paid it that much attention?”

She paused for a second, then, as if making up her mind, lifted her eyes to him:

“Do you mind if I come closer? I want to see.”

Howard nodded so vigorously that he surprised himself with his own eagerness:

“Yes. Yes... Yes! Of course!”—and immediately stepped aside, clearing her path to the canvas, as if giving way to something important.

Emily walked over and stood in front of the painting. She looked not fleetingly, not out of politeness, but as if she were really walking along those gray streets, peering into dark windows, squinting as she tried to make out something in the alley's gloom. Howard couldn't take his eyes off her, trying to guess what exactly caught her attention, which stroke seemed important to her, which corner meaningful. He wanted

to explain, to tell her why he had laid down that particular shadow, why he had left that corner empty, but the words stuck somewhere in his throat, refusing to form into clear phrases.

At last Emily tilted her head slightly and said quietly:

“There’s so much silence here... Not dead silence, but... tired. As if the city had lived through something for a long time and had just sat down on the edge of a bench, saying nothing. But at the same time... you see these thin lines?” She carefully, without touching the canvas, traced her finger in the air along the silvery strokes. “They seem to say: ‘I’m still here. I haven’t disappeared.’”

Howard nodded, as if those words had lifted a weight he had been carrying without noticing.

“Yes,” he agreed quietly. “I was trying... not to paint over the darkness, but just to show that light exists too. Even if there isn’t much of it.”

Emily stood before the painting a while longer, then turned to him, and in her gaze there was neither admiration nor pity, but something far more valuable—understanding. In that moment, Howard looked into her blue eyes—and seemed to see a whole map of feelings, carefully traced with invisible lines. There was no falseness in them, no desire to seem like someone else: only sincerity, a light anxiety, curiosity, and warmth that didn’t shout but quietly warmed. And in that gaze he suddenly found answers to many questions that had been tormenting him inside: not about the painting, not about the world, but about whether one could be vulnerable and still not seem weak; whether one could show

a shadow and still remain light; whether simply standing beside someone could already be a kind of help.

“You know,” she said, smiling slightly, “I think that’s the most honest kind of art. Not pretending the darkness isn’t there. But showing that even in it, you can find a little light.”

Howard exhaled, and the tension that had gripped his shoulders all day finally began to release.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, looking not at the painting but straight at her. “Sometimes it feels like if you see a shadow, it means you’re just fixated on the bad.”

“Or maybe you’re just not afraid to name it,” Emily answered calmly. “And that makes it less frightening.”

For a second the room went quiet again, but now the silence was different—not empty, but filled with something important.

Then Emily lifted her schoolbag slightly, as if to remind him that the world beyond that corner still existed and was expecting something from them.

“The break will be short,” she said, frowning a little, as if she herself regretted having to return to schedules and lessons. “We need to get to the last class as quickly as possible—biology. Otherwise Mrs. Crowley will unleash all her fury on us.”

Howard held his gaze on her face for a second, trying to preserve every detail in his memory: how the light fell on her hair, how a slight worry flickered in her blue eyes before class, how she gripped the handle of her bag a little tighter, as if it were her small anchor in the stormy school day.

“All right,” he said quietly, and in that “all right” there was no indifference, but a readiness to walk beside her, even if ahead lay not a canvas and a quiet classroom, but a noisy classroom and a strict teacher. “Let’s go. Only... thank you. Thank you for looking. For seeing more than just gray.”

Emily smiled—this time a little wider, as if something in her chest had also quietly unfurled, like a folded piece of paper finally being opened.

“Then let’s go,” she said, nodding slightly toward the door.

They left the classroom together. Howard lingered for a fraction of a second on the threshold, casting a last glance at the easel, his canvas, the shelves of works, Mr. Finch’s desk where everything was in its place. And he understood that order wasn’t only about arranged jars and clean brushes. It was also about knowing when to set down the brush and walk beside someone who lit the road not with bright spotlights, but simply with a warm, calm light.

The school corridor crashed over them with its usual bustle: someone ran by, stomping loudly, someone argued at the schedule board, someone laughed so ringingly that the sound seemed to bounce off the walls. Howard, adjusting to that noise after the quiet of the art room, walked beside Emily, trying not to look at her too openly but still catching every gesture. They quickened their pace, skirting a group of kids arguing about whose turn it was at the water cooler, and almost turned the corner where the corridor narrowed and led straight to the

science wing. And then, from around the corner, Mr. Finch suddenly appeared. He was walking quickly but not fussily, a folder under his arm and that expression on his face that said, “I have a task and I will do it”—yet he still managed to notice everything around him.

They almost collided. Emily stopped abruptly, clutching her bag to herself, and Howard instinctively stepped forward, as if wanting to shield her from an accidental collision, though there was no need.

“Oh! Sorry, Mr. Finch!” Emily blurted out, and in her voice there was that sincere awkwardness that always sounds more honest than any excuse.

Mr. Finch paused, tilted his head slightly, and a light smile flickered across his face—not wide, but the kind worn by people who know how to appreciate small coincidences.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” he said calmly, raising his folder a little, as if to show that he wasn’t in such a hurry as to not find a second for them. “Heading to biology? Mrs. Crowley doesn’t like her lessons to start with apologies.”

Emily nodded, blushing a little:

“Yes, we’re... in a hurry.”

Mr. Finch shifted his gaze to Howard. There was a quiet understanding in that look, as if he already knew the whole story that had happened with his gray city. In that moment, he understood everything, and for all the questions he had asked earlier, he found the answer in Howard’s eyes.

“Good,” he said quietly, and in that “good” there was more meaning than in long speeches. “Sometimes the most important thing is not to get everything done, but to take the right step at the right time.”

He gave a slight nod, as if confirming his own words, and continued down the corridor, leaving them standing at that crossroads.

Howard watched him go, feeling something quietly settle into place inside. It suddenly became clear to him: Mr. Finch had seen everything and understood everything. Not only about the painting, but about him as well—about how hard it could be to carry that gray world inside, and how much courage it took to allow even one bright line to appear in it. And the fact that the teacher didn’t say it aloud, but simply nodded at them as he passed, seemed to Howard the greatest approval he could have received.

“Let’s go,” Emily said quietly, touching his elbow—only for a second, barely perceptibly, but it was enough to bring him back to the corridor, to the bustle, to reality. “We’ve got a little over a minute left.”

Biology class truly flew by faster than all the others. Mrs. Crowley, with her usual strictness, talked about cell structure, clicked her pointer against the board, and from time to time scanned the class with her gaze, as if checking whether any chaos lurked that might disturb her perfect order. But to Howard, her voice sounded as if through cotton—he heard the intonations,

individual words, but the meaning slipped away.

He kept glancing in Emily's direction, but each time he seemed to be too late: she sat a little ahead and to the left, her head bent over her notebook, and he couldn't quite catch the right angle to see her face fully. He was endlessly curious to understand how he appeared in her eyes. Two years of school together—ever since she had transferred to their class in eighth grade—and they had never really talked. All that time he had considered her unreachable, untouchable, as if she lived in some other dimension where everything was brighter, cleaner, and more right than in his.

One question tormented him even more, a question that now seemed almost offensive in its missed opportunity: what did her painting look like? He couldn't forgive himself, or the schedule, or that cursed lack of time for not asking about her work. Fragments floated up in his mind on their own: section number three, dimmed light, silence in which other voices carried... What had she been drawing all that time while he tried to tame his gray city?

Mentally, he was already jumping ahead to Thursday, to the second art lesson. A whole scenario was rapidly unfolding in his head: he would enter calmly, without fuss, greet her in a way that sounded confident but not pompous. Then, as if in passing, he would ask about her painting—not pushily, but with sincere interest, as if it really mattered to him. He was already choosing intonations, trying out phrases, discarding those that sounded too

ornate or, on the contrary, too timid.

“No, better like this: ‘You know, I keep thinking about your work... I wonder what you’re creating there.’ Or no. Too much ‘I.’ Keep it simpler. ‘What’s on your easel right now?’—that’s it. Simple. Human. Although... no.”

Howard began living a whole separate life in his head—with dozens of possible ways things could go. He wanted to foresee everything: not to drop his supplies, not to stumble over his words, not to look frightened, as if the world were once again pressing down on him with all its weight. He wanted to calculate everything two, three, four steps ahead, so that in the moment when she looked at him again with her blue eyes, he could simply be himself—without fuss, without panic, without that endless attempt to control everything.

But class time was almost up. As soon as the bell rang, the classroom instantly exploded with movement: desks creaked, chairs clattered, voices merged into one hum, and everyone rushed for the door, as if afraid it would close at any second. Someone buttoned their jacket on the run, someone hurriedly stuffed notebooks into a worn backpack, someone argued about who would leave first. Howard froze for a moment, trying to catch sight of Emily, but the whirlwind had already carried her away—she flashed somewhere ahead, appeared for an instant between other people’s backs, clutching her bag, then disappeared into the stream of students hurrying about their business. He remained standing by his desk, feeling reality catch

up with him again, and understanding that all his perfectly planned dialogues, all those “two, three, four steps ahead” were now worth nothing. Life gave no rehearsals. It simply moved along, not asking whether he was ready.

Out in the corridor, Howard almost despaired for a moment, scanning the crowd for Emily. The hallway was long, with tall windows through which dim autumn light fell. The walls were painted a pale green, peeling in places, and old wooden benches with metal legs stood along them. The school was already living its ordinary life: someone laughed, someone argued, someone hurried, and someone just stood, like him, trying to catch a fleeting moment. Howard quickly glanced over his own appearance, adjusted his dark gray coat, checked that his collar lay straight, that his tie knot hadn't slipped, that the corner of a crumpled paper wasn't sticking out of his pocket—it was more important than ever that nothing spoiled his neat, composed look, as if a correct fold on his sleeve could somehow balance the awkwardness squeezing his chest.

“There can't be that many coincidences,” flashed through his mind. “That she came over, that she spoke, that she saw something in my painting... It can't be for nothing. And I can't lose it in this crowd.”

He searched the faces, hoping to spot her dark hair again, the light strand falling onto her cheek, her slightly squinting gaze. And then, amid the noise, he thought he heard her voice:

“Howard!”

He turned. In his imagination, Emily stood a little way off, by the window, waving to him, trying to get his attention. There was something in her eyes that instantly washed away all that inner turmoil: not the expectation of a perfect scenario, not the fear of saying the wrong thing, but a simple, vivid “you’re here, I see you.”

“Wait!” she called, pushing through the stream of kids, and finally came up to him, slightly out of breath, but with that same smile that made everything around a little brighter. “I thought you wouldn’t notice. It’s such chaos here, like everyone suddenly decided the break is a survival race.”

Howard smiled awkwardly, but this time he didn’t scold himself for the awkwardness. Let it be. Let her see him like that—a little lost, a little hurried, a little too eager to anticipate everything.

“I... yeah, I got held up a bit,” he admitted, not trying to seem like someone else. “Kept thinking... wanted to ask...”

Emily tilted her head slightly, as if listening not only to the words but to what lay behind them.

“About what?”

And then all his prepared phrases collapsed like a house of cards under a light breath. And in their place came something real.

“I wanted to ask about your painting,” he said simply, looking straight into her eyes. “The one in section number three. I never got to see it. And I... really want to.”

Emily was smiling—not broadly, but as if his words had landed on something inside her that had long been waiting for exactly that.

“Then come early on Thursday,” she said quietly, lowering her voice as if sharing a secret. “Before class starts. I haven’t put it away yet. I’ll show you.”

For a second, Howard felt that all that school noise, all that bustle had suddenly found meaning. Because ahead wasn’t just a lesson. Ahead was a moment that didn’t need to be calculated. It just needed to be lived.

“All right,” he answered quietly, feeling something inside him settle quietly but firmly into place. “I’ll be there.”

But then Emily’s image began to blur, and he heard someone calling him again, more insistently, louder.

“Howard! Howard, are you deaf?”

He flinched and turned. Bella, his classmate, stood in front of him with her usual mild sternness and a stack of printouts in her hands—the pages were a bit crumpled, with uneven edges: they had been typed on the school typewriter and then copied in the teachers’ lounge on an old photocopier that always smudged the paper with gray spots.

“Don’t forget to bring your part of the biology group project tomorrow. You remember your topic? Ethical aspects of biotechnologies, in case you forgot. We’re already behind, and Mrs. Crowley is starting to glare. If you don’t hand it in on time, we’ll all be in trouble, you understand.”

Howard nodded, flustered, feeling reality crash down on him with all its mundane weight.

“Yes, of course. Sorry... I just... got lost in thought.”

Bella sighed, as if used to Howard’s mind always being elsewhere, and nudged the stack of papers so they wouldn’t scatter.

“Just don’t forget. We’re hanging by a thread as it is.”

She nodded to him and immediately dissolved into the stream of students hurrying about their business.

Howard glanced again at that same window—the spot where, in his imagination, Emily had stood, waving and smiling at him. But she wasn’t there. Other students crowded around. And in the very corner that, in his mind, had been reserved just for her, there was only emptiness.

He felt a light but bitter disappointment—the kind that comes when you’ve seen something important so clearly, and it turned out to be only a trick of light and shadow. Fate, it seemed, had decided otherwise.

He adjusted his coat once more, as if that small, familiar gesture could give him back even a little confidence, and walked slowly down the corridor through the noise and bustle that no longer seemed hostile—just part of the world. A world where sometimes the most important conversations are still waiting for their hour.

Howard walked along the sidewalk, and yellow leaves rustled beneath the soles of his shoes—they covered the path like

someone had scattered dry gold coins across the asphalt. Along the sidewalk stretched a low white picket fence—neat, creaking slightly in the wind, as if quietly humming an old suburban melody. Behind it stood their house—a big two-story home with a dark blue front door and a brass handle that gleamed faintly even in that gray October light. A little to the right was the garage—just as solid and familiar as everything else in the neighborhood where the van Heltens lived.

A couple of months ago, a bright green lawn had spread in front of the house, a lawn his father tended so carefully: every Saturday he brought out the lawnmower, as if it were his own small ritual of order in a world where so much did not go according to plan. Now the lawn was covered with leaves, and there was something both sad and right about it—autumn was taking its due, and resisting it seemed pointless. The mailbox by the gate was empty, and that too carried a kind of silence: no bills, no letters, no small signs that the world remembered you.

Howard pushed the door open and stepped into the entryway. Inside, it smelled of something homely—a light aroma of cinnamon, old wood, and just a hint of freshly washed floor. He took off his coat and hung it carefully on the hook. Then he walked slowly through the entryway, casting brief glances into each room. To the left was the living room: a knitted shawl lay on the armchair, a stack of magazines on the table, and photographs in simple wooden frames hung on the wall—in one, Howard was still just a little boy; in another, Susan in first grade, laughing,

with two braids. The stairs to the second floor rose upward, creaking slightly, and somewhere above, in the quiet, one could almost hear the house breathing.

From the kitchen came a soft hum: something was sizzling on the stove, dishes clinked, and his mother's voice could be heard—quick, light, as if she were talking not to herself but to the whole world at once.

“Mom, hi,” Howard said quietly, peeking into the kitchen.

Elizabeth van Helten stood at the stove, leaning over slightly to look into the pan. Her hair was pinned up in a neat bun, but a couple of soft curls had escaped at each temple, curling and falling onto her cheeks—just like Emily's. At that accidental resemblance, Howard's heart skipped for a second, and he quickly looked away, as if his mother might read the thought in his eyes.

“Hi there, my little storm cloud! How was school? Tell me, what's new?” She turned and smiled, and there was so much warmth in that smile that even all his inner turmoil quieted for a moment.

“Oh, you know... everything's fine. I sat with Susan and Vanessa today, chatted a bit. Vanessa was talking about her ideas for the school play again. And Tyler was spreading some gossip as usual, but nothing serious.”

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