AMANUENSIS

1

Later, when the storms had stopped, they began to discover what so much snow could do. They saw the way it had collapsed roofs and bridges and trees, how it made roads impassable and telephones useless. And they saw that wild animals, deer and raccoons and foxes, had been forced to look for food at lower and lower elevations until the hunt had brought them to the streets of their town, where they found no better luck. For days after, they found carcasses all through their streets: gaunt and empty and wasted away. And if there were many among them who saw so much snow as a sign from heaven, there were none that saw it as a blessing. They called it a trial or a purification or a mystery of God, but they couldn't say they were grateful for it. And no one said anything about the drought they wouldn't have to worry over; no one said anything about the reservoir that would be filled to capacity for the first time in a decade.

They endured twenty-six consecutive days of heavy snow, one storm beginning before the last had ended, one storm overwhelming another. Nearly a month of constant snow, nearly a month inside their homes, weeks during which their churches were empty, their schools locked tight. And when it was nearly over and the sun began to shine through, they came out of their homes as though for the first time in their lives. The clouds thinned and the sun shone down and began the weeks-long process of condensing so many feet of snow, compressing it into mounds of hard ice veined with oil and soot. It was then, having come out to inspect the damage, to see what had collapsed, what had burst, what had failed to endure, that word of Dumond began to circulate. One of their neighbors was missing. Their junior high school science teacher had disappeared into the snow and hadn't returned.

What they heard was that a day or two earlier, when the last storm had started to fade and another had not come to replace it, Dumond had left early in the morning, on foot, intending to photograph ice crystals and falling flakes. This was a hobby of his and it came as no surprise to them that he would head to the foothills on a day when anyone else would have stayed inside his warm house. Dumond's wife waited through most of the day, she said, before she decided that enough was enough. Her husband had a tendency for losing time, she knew, but the snow had continued to fall that whole day. If it was tapering off, it was still immense and still fell so heavily at noon that she regretted his decision to leave. She was left to suspect that he had gotten himself stuck in a snowdrift or worse.

They admired Dumond and respected him. Those children who had sat through eighth-grade earth science were nearly unanimous when they called him a favorite teacher. His close neighbors called him a credit to society. And they wasted no time organizing themselves. They used every means at their disposal to rescue a man who had thought, just prematurely, that the weeks of snow had finally come to an end. But if they worked swiftly, after an initial search revealed nothing, they did not hope for success. A day turned into a week. But after so many storms had buried them under, they couldn't hope they were going to find him, not in so much snow, not for months. They were slow to say so, but each of them knew that no one, not even Dumond, could have survived an entire week exposed to such conditions.

They asked his wife if it would be alright for them to honor her husband, knowing that she was unlikely to abandon hope until she had some concrete evidence, even if it was clear to them that he was gone for good. They suggested that this was for the best, for her and for everyone. They took her silence as permission. They made the arrangements because they knew that she was in no condition to do so and that there was no one else to do it for her. The service was a matter of course. They gathered in a chapel, took turns telling each other just how much they had respected this man, just how much his absence would be felt. When they talked about him, they nodded in the direction of an empty casket. They held the memorial service in a church he hadn't entered in years and understood when his wife didn't join them.

Dumonds had been a part of this town for as long as anyone could remember. The schools here were rarely without a Mr. or Mrs. Dumond, and neither were various boards and civic committees. A Dumond had been the mayor once, one had been postmaster, and no less than four had stood in front of them on Sunday mornings, saying again and again what they had heard so many times before. But this Dumond was the last. Over the previous decades the family had dwindled: no children replaced those that grew old and passed. Dumond's parents were both dead, killed years earlier and in the same instant, when their car and another collided on a mountain road just minutes from their home. His two brothers were also dead: each a victim of his own, untreated depression. Neighbors had watched as the Dumond family, this constant in their town, turned slowly away from them until they were left with only this couple, blood and then marriage making them the last Dumonds. They had had no children of their own, and they politely ignored every hint that it wasn't too late to change that fact. They had stayed to themselves more often than had previous members of the family, his parents and theirs. Even before the snow had started to fall, neighbors had noticed that these Dumonds, these last Dumonds, were not as neighborly as they might have been, not as likely to visit over a fence. They rarely saw him outside of school; they hardly saw her at all. They regretted the distance that had grown between them and this family, how they had said nothing when he disappeared from their Sunday congregation so many years earlier, how they had never invited her at all.

Former students who attended the memorial service were quick to announce their fondness for a man who made science fun. He had taught them so much without making a minute of it seem like work. And as a kind of excuse for his final hours, they talked and talked about how much he loved the snow. They recalled their collective fondness of a year's first snowfall, how it meant that Mr. Dumond would cancel whatever he had scheduled, even a test, to take them outside where they could examine those early flakes. They recalled the things he taught them about snow crystals, how the popular wisdom about their inexhaustible variation was true but that there was more to the story. He told them that each snowfall contained millions of crystals that were nearly identical to each other and that any distinction was not a matter of creation but of environment, that each was formed minutes or hours earlier, far above the earth and that these crystals collided and joined and broke apart in the air, that what they saw in their hands, falling onto their tongues, captured on sheets of glass to be viewed under a microscope, were indicators of atmospheric conditions. The infinite patterns were there, but did they notice the consistency of their shape, the perfect hexagonal

symmetry of each flake? These were the result of a specific wind speed and humidity and temperature. He showed them photographs of snowflakes he had taken, photographs they could hardly believe were of naturally occurring phenomena. The complexity was incredible, the balance surprising. They couldn't see the world the same way after Mr. Dumond taught them to look at snow. They were indebted to him forever.

2

It was late spring when the snow was melted and gone, when the damage of the storms was largely repaired, that children—playing where they had been told not to—first learned that the empty Dumond house was not empty at all. Grown bored with their own backyards and the quiet routine of empty fields, the children examined the locked doors and windows of the house until something gave under pressure and allowed them inside. Dumond's wife had left without so much as a goodbye. She had hired a moving company and was gone before they had had the chance to offer help. Neighbors had told the children to stay away from that house, that it wasn't theirs to creep around in, that sooner or later someone would buy the place and that they could ask the new owner for a tour. But they also suspected the house might never sell, that it might sit there, empty for years, surrounded by its weeds and already brown lawn. And if they didn't show it—to maintain consistency, to appear disappointed by a rule not obeyed—the parents of those children were delighted to know that someone, finally, had explored the space where the Dumonds had lived. And what their children told them, when they reported sheepishly what they had done, was that in the basement of the Dumond house they had found an entire city.

Where they had expected to find nothing more than broken furniture not worth hefting into a moving truck, their children had found a series of tables filling the vast middle of Dumond's basement, and on those tables there were miniature churches and miniature stores and miniature houses in cul-de-sacs. And when neighbors finally came to inspect that basement, they saw that this was not just the scale model of a town, not just some three-dimensional, plastic landscape on which children might arrange toy cars, but it was a model of their town with their homes and their hardware store, their bakery, and their supermarket, and it was large beyond anything they had ever seen. No map, no model, no miniature of anything they had known had been so enormous in its scope and so precise in its detail. They stood there amazed, stood and admired the size of their town and how large it seemed now that it was so small, how it stretched out around the low hills surrounding them, how it filled the long space of its valley. They stood in awe of Dumond's scale model; they stared at themselves as though they were each aerial photographers.

There was a swell of pride in those first encounters with Dumond's model town, a sense of confidence that this place was worth a scale replica, as though it were the site of a civil war battle or the example of visionary city planning, architecture well ahead of its time. Neighbors and citizens, former students and their parents, everyone came to Dumond's empty house. They came to see the model and they came to see how accurately it was built, to see which details were included and which were not. They found the movie theater and the drycleaners, the record shop and the sporting goods. They found the library and its

statue garden, the cemetery and the vast, open park next to it. They even found the model train shop, a scale model of a store that sold scale models. They applauded Dumond for his attention to detail; they clapped their hands and smiled, impressed by the painstaking hours he must have dedicated to this work.

It was only later, when they were returning for a fourth or fifth visit, that they began to notice small mistakes that hadn't caught their eyes before. He had correct numbers on their houses, but the paint Dumond had chosen for any given door was often the wrong color. The headstones in the cemetery were blank. The marquee above the movie theater looked right, but the jumble of letters there said nothing at all. The wide variety of trees that lined their streets and filled their yards (elms and maples, willows and catalpas) was represented by a largely scattershot arrangement of one tree, a dummy version of some generic thing that corresponded to nothing they had ever seen. The precision that had impressed them at first was only a broad and general accuracy. The close detail they had seen was never truly there. This map was not the impressive reproduction they had taken it for. It was large, of course, and clearly the result of long work. But still, they had taken it for something greater, something immense and impossible. They tried to remind themselves that they had never created anything close to this themselves. They reminded themselves that no map is as precise as the one they hoped for.

What bothered them more, however, were the markings they found all over this miniature town of theirs. There, among this reproduction of their landscape, was a network of colored dots placed inexplicably on the corner of this roof or on a window of that building. They hadn't noticed them at first, but now they could see little more than the markings that filled the map, markings that corresponded to nothing they knew of. There were colored dots and nearly invisible numbers and letters, filled shapes and empty shapes, and dozens of icons they couldn't identify at all. Some of the markings they could guess at. They could tell, for example, that the various colored lines that ran along their streets corresponded in some way to their traffic patterns: a busy street was nearly filled, while the streets they lived on and especially the dead ends were almost empty. But their homes were also covered in markings, laid out in such a way that they appeared to be embellishments at first, as though this series of symbols might have been an architectural flourish, some contemporary design. They began to document the marks on their homes and compare them as though they were boy-scout merit badges or baseball cards they had collected. They attempted to translate Dumond's cryptic language, identifying which of them shared a red dot, which had the symbol of an opened eye, who had three yellow slashes and who had two overlapping circles.

By the time they discovered the key to Dumond's symbols, they had already invented one of their own. They had decided that certain markings were desirable and that others were not. They had begun to clap each other on the back when two houses shared a mark, when two neighborhoods on either side of the model town were found covered in matching symbols. They had determined that the markings were indications of certain verifiable facts: who drove which cars, who worked which jobs, whose property value had increased the most over recent years. They were right in their first general assumptions about the markings but wrong in nearly every particular. It was a substitute teacher at Dumond's school who finally

stumbled upon the key, filed away in the back of a cabinet Dumond had filled to capacity and that the substitute teacher had never felt was hers to use. After so many months and such dwindling space, that teacher had decided, finally, to empty the storage Dumond was clearly never coming back to use. The key itself was hand written and covered in smudges and corrections, originally typed but covered by ink from a dozen pens. It was ten pages of marks and their translations.

The key made the map seem innocuous at first. They had been right about the markings of traffic and walking routes; they had been right that certain markings indicated water lines, power mains, and shared resources. They were right that other markings indicated the value of their real estate or identified their tax bracket. But they couldn't have guessed at most of Dumond's symbols. He had markings to indicate their faith and the regularity of their attendance at church, how much debt they carried, what politics they endorsed, what bias they felt. His map showed things he would have had to watch them to know and things he shouldn't have known even if he had watched. He had charted out their lives in the most intrusive ways. He knew the secret routes their children took to school; he knew how much time their teenage daughters spent on the telephone; he knew which houses had the most valuable heirlooms. He knew which of them had trouble sleeping, which used medications for sexual dysfunction, which had been unfaithful to a spouse. They knew, almost immediately, that Dumond's information was invented, that it was faulty. He couldn't have known about attempts to defraud insurance companies, he shouldn't have known just how many of their children were left unattended in the late afternoon, when any stranger might walk into their homes and have his way with them.

If they denied each revelation Dumond's map seemed to make of them, they were also eager to spend more time in his old basement. They said very little to each other about what they saw there, except to scoff at a ridiculous hobby. They were quick to forget the praise they had had for Dumond. They were quick to recall just how much they had always disliked him.

3

Notwithstanding the history of the Dumond family, the people here could rarely remember that Dumond's wife was named Kathleen. They called her Catherine, Kelly, Karen, Carolyn, and even when they stumbled upon the right name, they were never confident that they had found it. They attempted her name without conviction because many of them had not met her, and many more had never seen her. She was foreign to them the way a distant relative might have been: she was someone who had lived many years on the periphery of their lives. They knew she was often sick. But the severity of her illnesses ranged, in their many accounts, from a series of colds and allergies to rare viruses and incurable diseases known only to specialists. She was anemic, frail, and on her death bed, they said. She got migraines and bloody noses, they said. They knew, without knowing how they knew, that she often slept sixteen hours a day, couldn't stand direct exposure to the sun, and had no capacity for digesting certain common foods.

They knew next to nothing about Kathleen Dumond. They were unable to admit that they had embraced the accounts of her illness because they had wanted some excuse for the

distance she kept from them. The people of this town were close to each other, knew each other well, and for Dumond to have married a woman who seemed unwilling to share in their closeness, unwilling to be a part of their society, was something that needed explaining. If they were prepared to believe any account of frailty, they did so out of a kindness they couldn't escape: no one in this town stayed away from the community of it unless they were compelled to. And so they talked about this woman, got her name wrong, refused to admit how unlikely their stories were, and prepared a set of excuses for the disappointment they felt.

What they never said, what seemed beyond saying, was that Dumond's wife was inferior to them, came from weaker stock, was less well prepared for living than they. The people of this town didn't get sick, didn't stay in their houses when the sun was out and work needed doing, didn't like to think about the various ways a human body might falter, leaving them incapacitated for any significant period. They were strong, reminded themselves how strong they were, and set about their lives with a sense of earned confidence. Dumond's wife, on the other hand, was a transplant and had come here only after Dumond had gone away from them, returning half a dozen years later, new wife in tow. They talked about what might have motivated such a move, why Dumond should have chosen to look elsewhere for what was clearly to be found among them. And they were forced to admit that for as little as they knew about his wife they didn't know much about Dumond, either. They knew that their children couldn't stop talking about Mr. Dumond, the science teacher, the one who always had a game or a clever way of making science fascinating. But this was the same Dumond who didn't seem to enjoy his hometown enough to hang around in any weather. And it was the same Dumond who traveled every summer, who disappeared for months at a time and never thought to say goodbye, who never thought to apologize for his absence.

Their children seemed to know the Dumonds had been around the world, that they had seen the pyramids, the great wall, and the leaning tower. They seemed to know that Dumond and his wife saved and saved on his meager salary so that the two of them could travel. Their children were jealous, they said; they regretted the things they hadn't seen. But parents and teachers were quick to remind the children that there was more to the world than sightseeing could provide. They recalled the many virtues of this place, of the camaraderie they felt, of the life-lessons they'd learned right here, in this town, in these streets, in that garden. They reminded the children that life was richer and more rewarding when one invested oneself in a place, in a community, and that globetrotting was simply a means of escaping responsibility. They said that Dumond may have filled the classroom with fun and games, but that he was a mercenary who saw those fun-filled hours as nothing more than a means of going away. Think about it, they said; not even our snow was good enough for him.

Some were not as quick to begrudge the Dumonds their travels but suspected, and had suspected all along, they said, that Dumond's map was accurate only in as far as it was autobiographical. They argued that the map was an indication that a pervert had lived among them, that they were fortunate to be rid of that influence. They argued that they all ought to be counting blessings in the absence of the Dumonds, that a wicked influence was gone from among them. They argued that God had protected them from an evil they had been blind to and that they

ought to sing praises for that. Did they need any more evidence than Dumond's conspicuous absence in their Sunday services? Did they have to look any further than his carnal behavior to see that he was wrong in the head and certainly an influence toward all that is misguided? Some were slower to condemn. They asked everyone to recall that Dumond and his wife had, in fact, been churchgoers even if their church was not the same that most in this town attended. They remembered that Dumond and his wife had belonged to some faith, that they had been seen entering a small chapel on the edge of town. They remembered that Dumond had said something once about marital unity and not wanting to make waves.

All through that summer, there was hardly room to stand in Dumond's basement at any hour of the day. They regularly filled that space and shouted at each other about what should be done. Self-appointed guards stood watch over the long series of tables to protect the map from vandalism and destruction. They said that no one was going to touch Dumond's model until everyone agreed what they should do with it, that if it were to be dismantled they would do it systematically. They said that it needed to be protected from those who would destroy what they couldn't understand. Others set to work transcribing the map, making detailed copies of Dumond's markings. They took photographs and argued that this thing was the work of a preservationist, that it froze a particular place in time and could be thought of as an historical document or as a time capsule. They said it was impressive to think that such an artifact could so enliven a community, could so effectively hold a mirror to a people. But this was wrong, of course. So many said so. They asked if they were expected to believe, as the map suggested, that their neighbors cared so little for their children or that they were surrounded by the depressed, the financially destitute, the immoral. This map, they said, was filled with lies. This map was the product of a stranger and a skeptic. He was a scientists, they said, and a not a good one at that. After all, he did no better than a job at a junior high school in a district notorious for low standards. Some agreed that Dumond had hardly reached the heights of his profession. Others said they were appalled to hear such criticism of themselves, the teachers who ate lunch next to Dumond, those who felt owed a certain respect, they said, for choosing to teach in this place.

There were those who found themselves conflicted. They were impressed by what Dumond had done, impressed by the stir he had caused, but also suspicious of his facts. They believed, they said, that this map was a rudimentary attempt, that it represented a first, broad sketch of this town. And if the details were wrong, the idea was right. They said that perhaps the map should be used as a template but that they should feel free to make corrections and alterations to fit what they knew to be true. They argued that the map could be useful but that it could also do them harm and that they needed to be careful. They said that no one could deny that Dumond had hit a nerve and that they would be wrong to simply ignore the significance of his act. This was an opportunity to understand their community better than they had, and they would be foolish not to take what was given.

One man got a black eye when he said to another that people like Dumond didn't belong in this town. A second man had asked what kind of person the first man thought Dumond was and if this had anything to do with politics. The first man said it was obvious, and the

second man took that as his cue. A woman admitted that she couldn't speak for the rest of her neighbors but that she could verify that Dumond got everything right about her house. She wasn't proud to admit it, she said, but facts were facts. Another woman said that one of two things was true, and either Dumond was a regrettable human being or her husband had some explaining to do. Several parents said that they had altered their schedules because of what the map had shown. They believed the map had been wrong, they said, but now they had made sure it was. One man said that he would not allow himself to be slandered by the speculations of a dead man. The map may have been right in some few generalities, he said, but it was filled with lies all the same. He had daughters to think of, he had a wife, and he wasn't going to rest easy while that map said what it did about him. Many of them apologized for wrongs they had committed, and others forgave sins that had never been confessed. Still others refused to let their children play with the sons and daughters of neighbors who had once been close friends.

4

They decided to protect themselves from the map and prohibit anyone from entering the empty house. They locked the doors and windows and said they would give the keys over to the new owners if anyone were willing to buy the house. And if it sat there in its vacancy, if the house was inaccessible to them, it still occupied much of their thinking and most of their conversations. They recalled what they had seen and argued about details. They disputed what markings had been on what properties and what the key had revealed. They fought among themselves until many of them refused to speak to one another ever again. They returned to their homes and their lives and said that time would tell, that eventually the basement would be opened and then they'd see who was right and who wasn't.

Some of them talked about opening Dumond's house and fixing the map, adding to the work they saw as incomplete. They might repaint the doors to match the colors of their own, they could find model trees that more accurately represented their real trees, and they could paint small human figures and fill the map with the people Dumond had forgotten to include. But their most important addition would be no addition at all. They could remove all of Dumond's markings that did not correspond to something they could see with their own eyes. They could return his key to his filing cabinet and clear the model town of the symbols that had so bothered and confused them. It would be better, they said. The map was a beautiful thing that anyone but a fool would admire. They would reinforce the tables Dumond had worked on and place a velvet rope around them. They would have electricians install a series of ceiling lights to best allow inspection of each wonderful detail. For years they could come and be impressed by the map. They argued for intervention, saying that the map would erode with time, that they needed to keep it free of dust. They said it would take years, but that eventually the map would show signs of age, that it would fail. If they could look after it, however, if they could care for it, they could save it.

Some of them claimed to have seen Dumond wandering in the darkness of their homes and backyards. Some said they had seen him watching from a distance through binoculars. He wasn't dead at all, they said, and he wasn't gone. If he had disappeared into the snow, he

had only gone into hiding. They recalled the body they never found; they recalled the wife who disappeared in the night. They recalled the map Dumond had made and how it had infected them.

Some considered dismantling the map and hiding it away. They might gently separate it into parts and scatter the pieces throughout their town. They might take each miniature church and lock it in a cabinet in a real church. They might take the miniature model of their movie theatre and lock it away in the projection booth of their real movie theatre. They might slide the models of their homes beneath their beds in the bedrooms of their real homes. They might spread the map to the far extremes of what it represented, hiding its parts as close as possible to the things Dumond had copied. They told themselves this would be a way to remember and that later, when they felt comfortable reconstructing the map, they would have little trouble finding its constituent parts. But they knew, even if they didn't say so, that they would never reconstruct the map even if they were successful in their plans to disseminate its parts. And they knew that by exploding this map they could save it, that they could make it real. Dumond's map would be safe, they knew, if they could bury it inside their town, every piece where it needed to be.

Then, after the long heat of August was gone and the leaves had begun to turn, some of them destroyed Dumond's scale model. They overwhelmed those who would have kept it and protected it. They tore it apart and crushed it, smashing it onto the hard concrete floor of that basement. They ran from the house carrying large sections of the map, dragging long sheets of plastic and pieces of green felt behind them. They soaked everything in gasoline and watched it burn in the middle of the street. They tore the key to Dumond's map into shreds and then burned the shreddings. They congratulated themselves on a work completed, on an evil banished. They smiled and said that now, at least, they could relax, knowing that nothing of Dumond was left among them. They wouldn't make eye contact with those who had fought so hard to stop them. They wouldn't speak to those who had opposed their plans.

Eventually, their conversations returned to the things they had always talked about: a football game the previous weekend, a problem at work, a series of storms the meteorologists had predicted. They rarely said anything to each other about the long months during which they had grown angry with each other about this thing that had invaded their lives. And if they mentioned Dumond from time to time, it was only the name of a man who had once lived in their town: a good man from a good family they were sad to have lost. They remembered the garden he'd kept, they remembered how their children had been invigorated by his teaching, and they remembered that he had had a peculiar hobby.

Dumond's house was still empty that winter. It was emptier than it had ever been. And when the first heavy snow came, they watched it from behind the windows of their homes. They watched as it slowly amassed on their lawns and in their streets. They watched the branches of their trees grow heavy with the weight. They watched Dumond's house disappear beneath the first snow of the season.