

FALLING
DOUG WILHELM

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Summary: Fifteen-year-old Matt's life has been turned upside-down, first when the brother he idolizes turns to drugs, then when a visit to a chat room leads him to a classmate, Katie, whom he likes very much but cannot trust with his family secret.

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CHOICE

The first place he wasn't going to anymore, after school, was home. Instead he put on his headphones and he walked.

It was finally getting better to be out here walking. It was finally spring. Well, more or less. You didn't get much real spring in northern New England—you'd get a tease of a nice day, then next you'd get slammed with sleet, snow, freezing rain, or just plain rain. Or all of that. It was best not to have expectations. Just put your head down and deal with it. He had walked through all of it, every day after school, all winter long, no matter what the weather was.

And today wasn't bad. The air was softer, warmer at last. Standing on the steps in front of school, ignoring the kids joking and teasing each other and flowing out around him, he started to zip up his sweatshirt as usual, but then left it open. He felt the warm, soft air through his T-shirt. He walked down the

steps and turned right, as he did every day after school, and he started to walk past the gym.

The gym was the other place he wasn't going into anymore, after school. It was in a high brick block that stuck out from the rest of the school, and around the corner on the Grove Street side it had narrow windows along the top of the wall. All through the winter, when he'd looked up there as he walked past in the afternoon, he had seen the yellow gym light and heard the guys or the coach yelling and the balls bouncing and the stop-and-start squeaking of their shoes.

He had known, all winter long, that if he'd ever pulled open the gym door and walked in there during basketball practice for the ninth-grade boys' team, it would have been a big thing. A major event. The guys would have all figured he'd finally come to his senses. Why, after all, would the kid who had been the best player on every school and AAU basketball team he'd ever joined, from fourth grade on, suddenly when he got to the freshman level—when he finally got the chance to put on the city uniform, just two steps from varsity—refuse to go out? Refuse to play, to practice, even to touch the ball? It didn't make sense. But he never explained, and he never pulled open the door. Never came close. Every afternoon, all winter, he had just walked by. Now the season was over and the bouncing and squeaking had stopped.

At the Grove Street light, he turned up the music in his headphones. The light was red and there were two crossing guards. Each day he had to decide which way to turn. This was

his big choice of the afternoon: turn left and walk toward the little city's downtown, or turn right toward his own neighborhood and the house he wasn't going into—not till dinnertime, when the creeps and losers were gone.

He turned left and started to walk along Grove Street toward downtown. It was interesting, once you had left the school and the choices you'd made behind and you had the headphones on and the music turned up, and you were just walking and looking around. It was like watching a movie with a soundtrack—a film you could walk right through, but you weren't really part of. He wasn't in this movie anymore. He didn't want to be. So he just walked and looked around.

Cars swished past on the slightly wet street. In each, a face slipped by; you'd see it for a second and then it was gone. The sidewalk along Grove Street had been buckled here and there by the spring thaw, so that sections of it were tented up and others tilted down, like an obstacle course. He stepped off the sidewalk, onto the street, to go around the slow-walking guy in the old torn parka patched with duct tape. The guy in the patched parka always walked slowly, partly because of how he was, but also because he was looking for empty, tossed-away bottles and cans to redeem for the five-cent deposit. The man's head was bobbing around and a white plastic shopping bag drooped from his hand, with what looked like just a couple of empties inside. He had a lot of slow searching ahead before he'd have enough to take over to the redemption center. Along the street came a lady jogger in shiny purple tights, running

with high steps and pushing a jogger's bicycle-wheeled baby carriage. In between the wheels was a kind of tent, of bright yellow nylon, with the baby zipped inside.

What was the point? The boy wondered this. He often did, walking and seeing the same sort of things day after day. What was the point of picking up empties for redemption, what was the point of jogging a baby inside a yellow tent? If a car were to suddenly swerve (maybe on a last patch of black ice) and kill him at this moment, would the world be any different? Not really. If the same thing were to happen to him in sixty years—let's say he still happened to be walking on Grove Street in sixty years—would it really matter then either? Was it supposed to matter? Did it ever?

He wasn't sure. Do lives *have* a point? All these people slipping by, these faces in the cars—do they need their lives to be something, to mean something, to leave more than a second's quick swish on a slightly wet street? Maybe they're all interchangeable faces in interchangeable cars, the way they seem to be right now: moving parts that just get tossed away after they're worn out or broken in an accident, and each part doesn't matter, not really. Maybe the whole machine is rusty and faded and creaky, like an old New England car after too many long winters.

He stepped off the sidewalk again, this time to walk around a man in a raincoat. But the man stepped aside, too. The boy stepped back on the sidewalk, but then so did the man. The boy looked up to see that the man was talking at him. He was a balding guy in a dark suit with a tan raincoat, and he was

talking at him. He looked angry, or stern. The boy didn't get it. He switched off his music and took off the phones.

"It's a God-given talent," the man was saying. "When you have a talent like that, God wants you to use it. To *use* it. Why else would you have it, for God's sake?"

He just looked at the man.

Now the man pointed at him. "Who are you to tell God it was wasted—a wasted investment?" the man said. "Not to mention the other guys. You know what kind of season they had. They hardly won a game. It's just a shame. When a kid has something special and he just walks away from that specialness . . ."

The man stepped back, looked at the boy, bunched his mouth up tight, and shook his head. He stepped past the boy and started walking. But as he did he said, loudly so the boy would hear: "It's just a goddamn shame."

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